Introduction

CHAPTER I

Introduction

Indian writing in English is a modern facet of that creative glory, which, starting from the Vedas, has gone on spreading its mellow light, at times with greater radiance and at times with lesser brilliance, under the inexorable vicissitudes of time and history, up to the present day. For centuries, literary expression was in Indian languages. The names of Kalidasa, Jayadeva and others will never be forgotten. Indian regional literatures presented a harmonious blending of Eastern ideas with those of the west. Quality works have been produced during the last two hundred years. The names of Rabindranath Tagore, Madhusudhan Dutt, Mohammed Iqbal and others are worthy of mention in this regard. It was with the arrival of the British that English language arrived on the Indian literary scene. The spread of education with the establishment of schools, colleges and universities, the widespread readership of English newspapers and periodicals, the advent of satellite channels, the internet and so on has only promoted Indian writing in India.

It would not be wrong to say that Indian English fiction had its real beginnings in the work of the great Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-94). His first published novel—Rajmohan’s Wife (1864) was in English. This was followed by Raj Lakshmi Devi’s The Hindu Wife (1876), Toru Dutt’s Bianca (1878), Kali Krishna Lahiri’s Roshinara (1881), H. Dutt’s Bijjoy Chand (1888), Kshetrapal Chakravarti’s Sarata and Hingana (1895) and so on. “The first Indian English novelist who attracted the attention of the Indian readers was K. S. Venkataramani” (Kalinnikova, 1982:73). Indian English fiction gained a firm foothold in the Indian literary scene with the arrival of such gifted writers like Rabindranath Tagore, K. S. Venkataramani, R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, K. A. Abbas, Nirad C. Chaudhuri, Raja Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kamala Markandaya, Manohar Balgonkar, Khushwant Singh, Anita Desai and others. The spark of Indian English fiction kindled by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and set ablaze by R. K. Narayan, Anand and others has burst into a roaring fire with the arrival of modern writers like S.

Many novelists who wrote in Indian languages had selected the Indian villages as the major backdrop for their tales. This may be because India is essentially a land of villages and hamlets and the majority of Indian people live in villages. The novelists might also have realised that the true depiction of the life in the villages is indeed the depiction of the life in India. Authentic representations of the villages and the life therein, can be found in plenty in vernacular literatures. But in Indian Writing in English these are not so common. This may perhaps be due to the fact that most of the Indian Writers in English are of the urban set and belong basically to towns and cities. Another possible reason might be that the life in the villages may appear to be eventless, and can draw attention only when its placid routine is disturbed by irresistible and most often external forces. Despite this, many novelists like Venkataramani, Anand, Bhattacharya, Narayan, Rao, Malgonkar, Markandaya, Desai and others have a special attachment to villages and have chosen to narrate the stories of the life and people of the villages.

An attentive perusal of the novels of these writers throws up a primary feature that the villages constitute not merely a backdrop but also play an important role in the very construction of the narratives, influencing and partaking in every depicted activity of the village. The village may act as a background, a locale, or a conceptual matrix, providing the basic, fundamental framework within which the narrative proceeds. It may remain as a passive observer silently witnessing the joys, sorrows, passions, losses and poverty of the village folk. Or, much more importantly, the village may become a veritable character in the novel by conditioning and determining each and every substantial turn of the story, or it may become a catalyst promoting effervescent reactions and responses in the characters. It will be no exaggeration to say that the stories narrated cannot happen anywhere else but in these villages.

Anand, an ardent believer in the doctrine of social revolution and the socialistic pattern of society, while shedding light on the Indian village, exposed the evils of industrialisation, land tenure and the zamindari system; casteism and the plight of the
plantation workers; coolies and similarly poor, socially, economically and politically exploited, illiterate, ignorant and superstition-ridden people of the lowest strata of the Indian society. His novels, which deal with the life in the villages, bring home to the reader, the pathetic condition of the over-burdened villager who is defenseless against superstitions and social conventions.

Anand also notices how the villagers in India lay groaning under gruelling poverty. It is also clear from the tone of his work that on his impressionable mind was also indelibly imprinted how the very life-blood of the poor, simple, illiterate farmers was being sucked by parasites like the landlord, the moneylender and the religious priest. “Anand had gained first hand experience of all these categories of people and his experience stood him in good stead, when he decided to write about them” (Agnihotri, 1984:28). Thus, the dismal life and humiliating conditions in which these downtrodden people, who were victims of the iniquitous social, economic and political order that existed in the Indian villages, was the subject Anand chose for himself.

Anand chose for the scene of action of his novels the villages of Punjab with which he was quite familiar. The scene of his first novel Untouchable is laid in a small remote village in Punjab called Bulandshahr. Though Anand speaks of the life in Bulandshahr, it is in a way quite universal, as far as India is concerned and the incidents narrated are pan-Indian in character. The second novel Coolie is located in various villages of the Punjab, though later it moves to Bombay and Simla. The hill boy Munnoo starts his journey from the village of Bilaspur. In Coolie, Anand focuses his attention on the economic exploitation that had been mercilessly and systematically carried on against the poor landless people known as coolies. In The Village and The Sword and the Sickle Anand portrays the burden of superstitions shouldered by the simple village folk and the atrocities committed by the village mahant, the moneylender and the zamindar. Economic exploitation of the simple village farmer is the theme of the novel The Village. The novel describes the life of the simple illiterate peasants of a Punjabi village called Nandpur. In Two Leaves and A Bud which deals with the miserable life of the Assam tea-plantation coolies, the hero Gangu, a Punjabi who belonged to a village near Hoshiarpur in the
Punjab goes to work in the Macpherson Tea Estate in distant Assam, little knowing that a tragic change of events awaits him there. *The Road* focuses on the miseries and the disabilities to which the untouchable cobbler youths are subjected to in the Indian villages. *Gauri* also highlights the economic exploitation in the villages. Hence it is obvious that in Anand, the village is intricately and inseparably blended not only with the life of the characters but also with the ebbs and eddies of the narrative.

When we come to Narayan the pure artist, whose literary achievement depends to a great extent on his superb ability to remain uninvolved, we see in his novels a faithful representation of the life, customs, problems and superstitions of the rural folk. By creating a highly unforgettable fictional region called Malgudi and portraying its development from a village to a town, he explores, the growing impact of an industrial and urban, economic and commercial culture on a predominantly rural, agricultural community. In the process, he is able to present, the undoing of old ways of living and values cherished for centuries, and their replacement by new patterns of life and values. Malgudi is always in a state of flux. Inspite of all its apparent modernisation, Malgudi is still rooted in the past and derives its vital force from its ancient culture. While depicting the contours of the archetypal South Indian village through Malgudi, Narayan portrays the sorrows, joys and ironies in the life of different types of people, who live and die in Malgudi or those who pass through it.

In the earlier novels, we have the simpler pictures of school children, college boys and college teachers. In the later novels we enter the more complex world of dreamers, artists, financiers, speculators, adventurers, eccentrics, cranks, cinema stars, sanyasis and several others. (Agnihotri, 1984:28)

Strictly maintaining an attitude of non-involvement in and unconcern with the problems of the day, Narayan confines himself to Malgudi and deals with the life, romance, marriage, sorrows and joys of the folk living there. Malgudi has well defined landmarks, and the physical features of the region are fixed and well marked. But in other respects it is like any other real village or town, Malgudi also grows and develops through the various novels. It would be indeed interesting to speculate on the
correspondence between the ‘virtual’ village of Malgudi and the real villages of South India and observe how far ‘faithful and true’ Narayan’s depiction turns out to be. In one sense, Malgudi is no longer a village because it appears to have many institutions, offices and other paraphernalia, which one usually associates with an urban setting. Mention is made about the construction of the railway line to Malgudi and about the trains going to various places from Malgudi. When the Mempi Hills grow into a famous tourist attraction, the railway station also develops and acquires importance. Raju in *The Guide* runs a stall on the station platform. The Mempi Hill is connected with Malgudi railway station by means of buses and taxis. Many new shops and hotels are opened and Malgudi grows and develops. Chandran and Ramu in *The Bachelor of Arts* visit “The Palace Talkies” where both Tamil and English films are shown. Despite these unmistakable marks of an urban setting, the values, customs, life pattern and belief systems of the people of Malgudi seem to belong, to a great extent, to an age-old and time-tested rural practices and attitudes.

The philosopher novelist Rao has portrayed, on the one hand, the economic exploitations and social disabilities of rural India, and on the other, the political awakening that swept through the Indian villages. He has also shown the influence of the charismatic personality of Mahatma Gandhi on the poor Indian villagers. Rao has depicted the tyranny of casteism in the village and the exploitation of the poor. Rao depicts the day-to-day life of the villagers with the monotonous events of planting, harvesting, marrying and celebrating festivals. Rao’s novel *Kanthapura* portrays a typical South Indian village caught in the whirlpool of communal hatred and genocide that followed the partition of the Indian sub-continent. The novel is easily recognisable as a village novel, and it has obvious affinities with those novels that record the largely unchanging yet ever-shifting spectrum that is Indian village life. The descriptions of the village – its physical features, its separate living places for different castes, the occupations of the villagers, the celebrations of festivals – are quite vivid and realistic. The novel sheds light upon the appalling social conditions of the Indian villagers during the colonial period. Thus the village of Kantapura is a pulsating picture of a representative South Indian Village going through a hectic phase of the independence
movement under the inspiring guidance of the great apostle of non-violence, Mahatma Gandhi. In short, it may be said that *Kanthapura* is a modern village epic.

Markandaya, the returned expatriate, portrays the sorrows and sufferings of the village people and their ties to the land in her novels. She also shows admirable ability in delineating disturbed feminine sensibilities with masterly strokes of characterisation. In her novel *Nectar in a Sieve* she presents the husband and wife Nathan and Rukmani, as the mute representatives of the thousands of uprooted peasants India. The novel exposes the evils of modern industrialisation:

It is also the story of a few peasants whose destiny is to suffer. Here is a group of peasants who lead a hand-to-mouth existence from what their tenant-holdings earn. With the establishment of a big tannery this little South Indian village with its peasant population is thrown to the blood-sucking human jackals. Flood, drought and famine rushed to aid of the landlords and the businessmen who callously exploit the situation. (Radhakrishnan, 1984: 106)

*Nectar in a Sieve* is in fact the story of the rural Indian farmer who, standing knee deep in water and perspiring in the burning heat of the sun, cultivates rice. Rice for them is like nectar, the valuable drink of gods that gives everlasting life. But no matter how hard the peasant may toil, he is unable to have rice in his home. Just like water in a sieve, rice slips though his fingers into the barns of the landlords and the moneylenders. The novel exposes the poverty, the starvation and the humiliation to which the Indian peasants are subjected. It also shows the lures of industrialisation, the economic and psychological crisis of generations, the consciousness of the working class and the beginnings of the trade union movement. *Nectar in a Sieve* is a simple, down-to-earth story of human suffering which more than a shelf of books of history and economics explains the plight of the people of India.

Thus it is manifestly clear that the novels of these Indian writers in English present realistic accounts of Indian villages and the changes felt and experienced in them during the twentieth century. The Indian villages in spite of their diversities have a
fundamental unity. Even though there are differences in language and the subtleties of social structure, there is a common basic pattern recognisable all over India. It is very often in the rural context that the regional reality and the Indian reality merge. The reflection of this merger can be clearly perceived in the Indian English novels.

Centuries before the arrival of the British, the Indian villages existed as self-sufficient, self-governing communities. Based on a rural agrarian economy, structured on the basis of castes, a feudal class system and a rigid hierarchy, the villages remained largely static. In a sense, they were little self-sufficient republics. The arrival of the British brought a radical structural transformation to the traditional community life of the Indian sub-continent. The ancient isolated pattern of the village was slowly and forcibly reformulated into an industrial or colonial pattern. The national movement invested the Indian villages with a new identity. The work of the Indian National congress and Gandhi made the Village community more reactive and more responsible. The social reforms, economic independence movements and political self-determination helped the village communities to play an entirely new social role.

This developmental process of the Indian villages is depicted most strikingly and explicitly in the Indian English novels and so the novel is perhaps the most appropriate literary genre for a study of the transformative processes which overtook the Indian village in the past one hundred and fifty years. In the post independence era the institution of parliamentary democracy, the incessant process of urbanisation, the interventions of a national economy and the globalisation and liberalisation have brought in their wake a new identity for the Indian village community even while preserving certain basic features of its rural identity.

An attempt is made here to trace the structural and formal changes of the Indian village as a physical space, lived space and a conceptual space as depicted in the selected novels of the Anand, Narayan, Rao and Markandaya. The village as it appears in the Indian novels is a set of discursive practices regarding topography and space, structure and hierarchy, ways of life and occupations, rituals and conventions, customs and beliefs, and so on. Hence a detailed study concerning the process of Indian modernisation, the
changes in the rural and socio-cultural patterns, and the economic and political organisations is very essential.

Any study of the village in narratives can proceed only through a fundamental understanding of what constitutes a village, what a village is, in the Indian context. In other words, one will be required to isolate the fundamental factors, which go into the constitution of whatever is understood as a village. Indeed, it is a commonplace to say that there are different notions – and hence definitions too – of the village for different people, depending on what factors enter predominantly into their considerations. The village has been variously understood as a geographical space, a structure of dwellings, a territorial entity, a system of ownership/holding, a community, a set of life practices, a social formation, an entity of economic production, the source of certain conceptual systems and beliefs, and so on and so forth. From the above itself it goes without saying that the village is a highly complex phenomenon, which requires theorising, and analysis on a number of different levels if one is to be able to grasp the vast richness of its contours.

Empirical data on the transformations of the Indian villages as documented by economic and social surveys is a must in this direction. That being the case, the present study attempts to bring an understanding of Indian villages, in terms of social, political, economic, religious, cultural, and geographical factors that determine and influence the village community, to bear upon a detailed analysis of the representations of the village in Indian narratives in English.

Titled “The ‘Village’ in Narratives: A Study of the Representations of Rurality in Selected Novels of Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan, Raja Rao and Kamala Markandaya,” the present study is divided into six chapters. In this study, the village is approached from three different perspectives thereby offering three categories of analysis as follows:

(a) The village as a physical/real space;
(b) The village as a social/lived space;
The village as a conceptual/mental space.

The village is first taken up as a physical space where the different definitions and theories regarding a village are examined and an attempt is made to view different types of villages on the basis of these theories. This category addresses questions and issues such as territory, geographical location, factors of size, shape, layout, planning, features of ownership and holding, structures of houses and dwellings, populations and the like. In this category the village is approached as a physical entity in a particular place at a particular time with specific particulars of physical existence. In the next step, the Indian village is considered as a social space and attention is paid to the factors of community, society, economy and occupations. It also tries to explore the life practices and the family structure of the villagers. A concise study is also made of the caste system, which has existed in the villages from time immemorial and is quite strong even today in the twenty-first century. The different classifications of the village, the kinship and marriage systems, and social legislations all come within the purview of this section. Next the village is studied as a conceptual space. This section analyses the rituals, the belief systems, the knowledge systems and religion of the village community. In other words, it is the inner realm of ideas, that function as the rationale of everyday life, that is the focus here. An endeavour will also be made to examine the historicity of the fictional works and arrive at the different types of historicities present therein.