CHAPTER IV

The Urban Dilemma: Religion and Politics in the 1990s.

(Meher Pestonji’s Pervez – A Novel and David Davidar’s The Solitude of Emperors)

Religion is a personal matter which should have no place in politics.

– Mahatma Gandhi

4.1. Introduction –

4.1.1. The Paradoxes of the 1990s –

The 1990s which saw the advent of globalization in India were marked by sweeping economic reforms and by momentous progress and liberation in every sphere. Ironically, the political scene of the decade was largely unstable. The country witnessed four general elections and the rule of six Prime Ministers within a short span of ten years. There was an unprecedented upsurge of casteism and religious fundamentalism in national politics. In the international sphere, with the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, India had to re-order her foreign policy and accept Western capitalist globalization. However, Indian confidence and prestige rose with greater economic power and global achievements in spheres ranging from business and industry to cinema, art and literature.

By the end of the eighties, India had started preparing for the twenty-first century, led by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi’s government. There was economic progress and significant foreign policy achievements but the issue of corruption in defence deals led to the fall of the Congress government. Following mid-term elections, the National Front government led by V.P. Singh came to power in December 1989. However differences within this coalition government encouraged divisive tendencies. The Mandal commission report favouring increased reservation for backward castes in government jobs led to violent and widespread protests by upper-caste youth. On the other hand, Hindu right-wing organisations led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) sought to revive the Hindutva ideology as a means to political power. Their claim that the Babri Masjid - a sixteenth century mosque in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh had been built over a temple marking the birthplace of Lord Rama, and hence should
be demolished, in order to build a Ram Temple on the same site, became the bone of contention between Hindu and Muslim communities. BJP leader L.K. Advani’s six thousand mile long political campaign or Rath Yatra across India for the cause of the Ram Temple inflamed communal passions to a feverish pitch. The ensuing religious riots led to many deaths and the National Front government fell in November 1990.

The Chandra Shekhar government held office until March 1991 when the next general elections were announced. The Congress party’s popular prime ministerial candidate Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by the Sri Lankan terrorist group LTTE during an election campaign in May 1991. The Congress benefitted from a strong sympathy wave and won the elections. Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao led the Congress government at the centre for a full five-year term. In order to tide over the debt crisis and bankruptcy facing the nation, he undertook the most radical economic reforms. His government dismantled the state-controlled economic structure and opened Indian economy to the world market. This liberalization paved the way for private entrepreneurial miracles, inflow of foreign exchange and stupendous financial growth. However, the government failed to prevent the demolition of the Babri Masjid in December 1992 by Hindu fundamentalists, leading to widespread and long-lasting bloody Hindu-Muslim riots and violence all over the country that challenged national security and integrity. Gradually, there was a slowing down of economic reforms and growth, and charges of bribery and foreign exchange violations surfaced against many Congress leaders.

In the 1996 general elections no political party won a clear majority. The BJP arose as a powerful national player. Between 1996 and 1998 the country was under two United Front governments led by H.D. Deve Gowda and I.K. Gujral with the support of the Congress and Communist parties. Fresh elections in 1998 led to the formation of a BJP-led government with Atal Bihari Vajpayee as Prime Minister. However, the instability of the large coalition government led to elections in 1999. The new millennium was ushered in by the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition government with Vajpayee again at the helm.

4.1.2. The Age in the Indian English Novel -

A number of novels have been written on the national scene in the 1990s. The corruption in ministerial, bureaucratic and corporate circles is discussed in the novels of Malathi Rao, Kishore Bhimani, Jayabroto Chatterjee, Anurag Mathur, Nalinaksha Bhattacharya, Kiran Doshi, S.K. Banerjee, Avatar Singh, Shiv Sharma and N.K. Singh. The arrival of westernisation and the rise of the working classes are reflected by novels like Ashok Banker’s

4.1.3. The Selected Novels –

Meher Pestonji, a journalist and activist, and David Davidar, an editor and publisher, well-known in their respective professions, have risen to prominence as fiction writers with their works published in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Meher Pestonji’s Pervez and Davidar’s The Solitude of Emperors cast an introspective and retrospective look at the nation in the last decade of the twentieth century. Deeply concerned over the rise of religious fundamentalism, they view the communal politics of the 1990s as an urban phenomenon. Both narratives revolve around the Ayodhya dispute, the demolition of the Babri mosque and the consequent riots in Bombay during 1992-1993. They are imbued with the spirit of Bombay and there is an uncanny similarity in the reporting of the precursors, actual events and aftermath of the communal crisis. In the battle of the protagonists with communal forces, the intertwining of the personal and the national is finely portrayed. The characters symbolise the national psyche scarred by religious divisions. While poignantly chronicling the lethal mixing of religion and politics, the novelists expose politicians who create divisions of religion, culture and class for political gains. They advocate secularism as a necessary social and political principle in the multi-religious and multi-cultural Indian democracy.


4.2.1. The Novelist –

Born in Mumbai (Bombay) in 1946, journalist and social activist Meher Pestonji has fought for the oppressed and underprivileged, for rape-victims, slum-dwellers and street children, since the 1970s. The communal riots of 1992-93 fuelled her resolve to fight
communalism and parochialism. Disillusioned with market-oriented journalism, she switched to creative writing. She has emerged as a powerful writer with two novels - Pervez (2003) and Sadak Chhaap (2005). Sadak Chhaap depicting Mumbai’s street children reflects her voluntary work with them. This popular, widely translated novel campaigns against the neglect and abuse of India’s huge population of street children. Her collection of short stories - Mixed Marriage and Other Parsi Stories (1999) has been admired for its insight into Parsi life, style, characterization and treatment of social and moral issues.

4.2.2. The Novel –

Pervez, Meher Pestonji’s debut novel, is set in Bombay of the nineties, ravaged by religious riots. Aditi De writing in the Hindu Literary Review describes Pervez as, “a compassionate but topical look at our collective lives in the throes of saffronisation, communal divides and societal disparities... .” De continues, “Who are we, as a people? Where are we headed? What defines an individual within the bounds of nationhood? Is secularism a valid ideal as the ground shifts beneath our feet? These questions remain uppermost in the reader's mind throughout the novel.” Pervez is also a novel of education portraying the fascinating growth of a woman from political innocence to maturity, from weak feminine to a woman of conviction, from blissful ignorance to striking awareness of one’s own inner potential. The heroine Pervez finds her identity while confronting communalists and fundamental beliefs. She observes India with compassion and objectivity, finally finding fulfilment as a social worker and activist.

4.2.3. The Personal and The National –

4.2.3.1. The Build-Up –

The central figure of Meher Pestonji’s Pervez is the bold and beautiful young woman Pervez. Born into an affluent Parsi family in Bombay, Pervez is sensitive and intelligent, with a kindness that transcends all boundaries. She defies her parents to marry for love into a poor Goan Christian family. Cheated by her husband, she divorces him and returns to her brother Darius in Bombay, where she is looked down upon by relatives. Here, at twenty-nine, Pervez the rebel begins life anew, for, she no longer fits into the elite social circle of her brother.

Having faced the vagaries of life, Pervez introspects and retrospects. Introduced to Communism by her activist friends Naina and Siddharth, she is challenged to join the ranks of the poorest. Attracted by their austerity and commitment, she leaves her posh family home
for the poor suburb of Kalina. However, her open-mindedness prevents her from blindly accepting any ideology even as she meets a host of socially and politically conscious citizens. She meets Pawan - a photographer and activist, Prabha - a feminist, Vandana - a model, Vishal - a Dalit leader, Saeed - a poor Muslim social worker and his brother Munnawar who has an affair with a Hindu girl in the worst of times. While everybody debates the Hindu-Muslim tensions and condemns L.K. Advani’s Rath Yatra advocating the building of a Ram Temple at the site of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, Pervez is rather ignorant about the national crisis. She educates herself on national issues, absorbing everything, shunning all extremes and pragmatically synthesizing the best views. While admiring the idealistic fervour of her Communist friends, she realizes that the idea of a People’s Revolution to achieve a totally classless society is utopian. While appreciating the Gandhians, she wonders if their gentleness can counter ruthless modern fundamentalists. Her concern is with how the battered spirit of communal harmony can be rekindled and made to percolate where needed. Henceforth, her personal destiny would be increasingly intertwined with national events.

Pervez starts visiting the slums of Dharavi for social work and street-theatre. The Ayodhya movement begins. As right-wing Hindu organizations mobilize support for the Ram Temple and target minorities, Pervez’s friends like Siddharth find innovative ways to reconcile Hindus and Muslims. Pervez involves Muslim youth like Munnawar in social service. At the Governor’s peace-march attended by celebrities and commoners, Pervez muses –

“....the battle against communal hatred transcended class. And demanded coordination between classes. What role could she play in that process?” (p.108)

She finds deep satisfaction in organizing exhibitions and cultural programmes promoting secularism. She is elated to see the bonds that bind a diverse nation together. Pervez’s brother Darius and his family doctor Dilip Kanitkar openly advocate communal harmony, while Vasant Chawla, the corrupt hotel tycoon, represents radical Hinduism. He says,

“Whether Ram lived or not is not important. If Hindus believe this is where he was born then that piece of land becomes sacred to them. And they must have Ram temple… You don’t know what it is to experience Partition... I lost one brother in Lahore. Killed by the son of the Muslim dai who breastfed him.” (p.70)

Darius’ wife Dhun represents the selfish elite who refuse to take a stand. Blind to the fact that rampaging rioters are nearing her own home, she supports Vasant Chawla.
4.2.3.2. The Catastrophe –

The demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya by Hindu fanatics, on 6 December 1992, leads to Hindu-Muslim riots. Trapped in Dharavi on the fateful day, Pervez is shocked by the human savagery, by scenes of murder, arson and looting. Risking her own life she saves a child from rampaging mobs, and stops two groups from throwing petrol bombs at each other. She walks home alone through the curfew. Her heroism surprises all. She calls herself a ‘survivor’. While the city is torn apart by hatred and fear, politicians cater to vote-banks and police become mere agents of communalists -

“The administration crumbled, became dysfunctional within hours…The city kept burning…Bombay was left scarred with wounds that would never heal.” (p.249)

As riots break out repeatedly, Pervez and her friends comfort victims, focusing on rebuilding trust and keeping politicians away. A new, confident Pervez emerges - donating blood and distributing food in burning slums. Yet, she is traumatized when Munnawar is stabbed. She doubts the existence of God who remains silent as people kill in His name. The vicious cycle of violence culminates in the serial bomb blasts that rock Bombay in March 1993.

It is the wisdom and courage of commoners that finally reins in the riots. The citizens of Bombay unite across barriers. Pervez works hard as a leader in both elite circles and slums, to expose rioters, crush rumours and prejudices, and to educate people about nation-building. She criticises her own minority Parsi community for remaining aloof and decides to act alone on their behalf to reunite Hindus and Muslims. She gives new voice to ordinary women who suffer most during riots though they do not condone the violence perpetrated by men. In one of the many peace marches, Pervez finds a radical Shiv Sena activist masquerading as a man of peace and exposes him before television cameras. She recognizes the ‘sham’ of ‘high culture’ as she finds the elite exploiting the situation for personal gains. Horrified as masks fall off, she fears if she too would one day become insensitive to human suffering.

4.2.3.3. The Aftermath –

Pervez’s handling of the aftermath of the Bombay riots marks the culmination of her personal transformation through involvement in national life. In the decisive stage of her political maturation as a citizen, she declares an all-out war against communalists. She begins with the powerful hotelier Vasant Chawla who had been laughing and drinking as rioters
burned slums near his hotel. She forces him to see pictures of burnt, butchered and disfigured bodies with the face of his grandson Gaurav superimposed on them, saying,

“Gaurav’s face has been superimposed over the faces of real victims to make you realise what those families have suffered...Thousands of people throughout the country are suffering because gullible people were egged on into committing crimes they wouldn’t dream of in their normal senses.” (p.280)

As Pervez leaves Vasant Chawla sobbing, the novelist observes,

“...Pervez was a new woman. She had tasted power.” (p.281)

Even as she advocates psychological warfare, Pervez observes,

“It’s necessary to be aggressive about non-violence....The Gandhians...may be wonderful people but they’re out of their depth in today’s world. To be effective you have to speak the same language as militants, in your own way.” (p.282)

Despite the scepticism of her friends, Pervez takes the women and children of riot-hit Dharavi on a picnic. She assures them of a better future. When a little girl asks her if she would remain alive to see this future, Pervez feels the unseen mental trauma of a nation:

“The past...can it ever be erased.......How would today’s collective memory shape the future? Could people forgive neighbours who’d looted and burnt? Would grief drive some insane? Would Bombay’s cosmopolitan character survive?” (p.285)

Once Pervez has broken the shackles in public life, she finds new courage in private life. She charts her own course. Having learnt a bitter lesson from her marriage, she ensures she is not emotionally exploited again, whether it is the short affair with Pawan or the insults of her ex-suitor Farhad or the apology of her ex-husband Fred. She desires genuine, spiritual love but feels most men would not subscribe to it. She fears she may have been infected with HIV by her faithless husband. The novel lyrically sums up her emotional state of mind –

“The memory of love in all its innocence. Nostalgia for loss of innocence. Pain at knowing innocence can never be restored. And enduring tenderness.” (p.229)

After the riots, Pervez is unconcerned with mundane desires. She finds a greater mission in fighting religious intolerance and serving the less privileged.

4.2.3.4. The Epilogue –

The epilogue of the novel is set nearly a decade later in 2002. Communal forces continue to dominate the national polity. The Ayodhya movement is revived by Hindu radicals with the active support of the right-wing BJP government at the centre. The horror of the Godhra
riots in Gujarat is played out. Still single and living in her small flat in Kalina, Bombay, Pervez is a lecturer in Psychology and is actively involved in social work. Her friend Naina’s husband Siddharth, now senior correspondent with *The Hindu* newspaper, is sent to Gujarat to cover the riots. He is assaulted for exposing the government sponsored pogrom of genocide against Muslims. He survives the near fatal bullet and returns to Bombay to recuperate. Siddharth and Naina share horrifying accounts of Hindus and Muslims being roasted alive, women gang-raped, infants battered and burnt, of wombs ripped open and families torn apart. Shaken, Pervez and her students set out for relief camps in Gujarat. Bravely fighting their own disillusionment, they offer moral support and material help to victims. Pervez returns to Bombay, filled with doubt and dejected by the attitude of the rulers. The novel ends with a prayer for peace.

4.2.4. Documenting National History

4.2.4.1. Secularism Versus Communalism

Meher Pestonji's heroine Pervez exemplifies the modern outlook and self-awareness of the Indian woman in the 1990s. Though disowned by her parents and cheated by her husband, she does not regret her love marriage or divorce. Proud and dignified, she refuses the charity of her rich brother Darius. She fights the scorn of conservatives and the unwelcome attention of womanizers. As soon as she returns to Bombay in 1990, she is drawn into political discussions. The conversations at the party thrown by Darius reveal the charged atmosphere -

“...We’re talking of globalization, of attracting foreign capital.....and then we have a sati in Rajasthan, a politician going on a rath-yatra. The West will think we’re going back to the Dark Ages.”....“...someone has to put those Mussalmaans in place. First they divide our country, make their Pakistan, still want to be big boss here! And Congress party panders to all their whims.” (p.9, 10)

Pervez is repulsed by the transformation of Bombay for communalism has pervaded its most sophisticated societies, its beaches are dirty and its walls are stained with religious slogans.

On the other hand, a socialist movement is initiated by some educated citizens. They fight capitalists and politicians who divide the masses. They support struggles of the downtrodden. As the *Rath Yatra* progresses, they condemn the dangerous politics of saffronisation -

“Heard the latest on the rath-yatra?....There’s this Hindutva fanatic called Advani who’s driving around the country in a Toyota decorated like a fifteenth-century chariot....He makes such inflammatory speeches that there are communal riots.....seventeen people...were burnt alive in a village.....That man should be
flogged...If the government wanted they could have stopped him. But Advani’s riding a popular wave, and they’re worried about their vote bank.” (p.43)

While politicians incite religious passions, a few still retain sanity. As Darius puts it,

“Hinduism has so many faces...Hinduism of mythology.....of philosophy......the Hinduism practised in yoga.... The Hindutva Advani espouses is the lowest form of political aggrandisement.” (p.56)

The rise of communal politics in the nineties is linked to the feminist movement by Pervez's friends. Prabha the feminist social worker explains how right-wing Hindu politicians had cleverly usurped the women’s movement -

“For years women’s groups have been demanding equality before law for women of different communities.... The Women’s Conference at Trivandrum was the first to demand a Uniform Civil Code way back in 1984. Now these Hindutva guys have made it into a Hindu versus Muslim campaign to impose their code on Muslims who have been governed by Shariat law...”(p.46)

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had added to the damage by appeasing both communities – submitting to the Islamic Shariat law (which is discriminatory to women) in the Shah Bano case and allowing Hindu radicals to worship their idols inside the Babri Mosque. As religious intolerance and fanaticism worsens, feminists and secularists find themselves fighting the powerful orthodoxy. Hindu fanatics even advocate inhuman customs like sati or the burning of the widow on her husband's funeral pyre -

“The...Rajput custom, practised by women to escape being gangraped by invaders in medieval times, had been glorified to fuel Hindu revivalism in 1987...” (p.73)

Casteism, deep class-divides and regionalism also encourage communalism. Meher Pestonji bares the tattered social fabric. Upper and lower caste Hindus clash over the recommendations of the Mandal commission providing more government jobs to lower castes. The agony of the Dalits who are denied dignity, jobs and education, is seen in the speeches and songs of Pervez's friend Vishal. The greatest blow comes when a riot-victim refuses blood donated by Vishal. Pestonji also castigates the radical and tyrannical Shiv Sena, a major regional party in Maharashtra and a chief player in the 1992 riots. It had been established by Bal Thackeray, a cartoonist-cum-journalist and an admirer of Hitler. Several of its leaders have criminal records. Their violent regionalism thrives on underdevelopment.

The contemporary economic situation marred by religious passions, is also depicted. The tottering economy is on the way to vital liberal reforms. Most businessmen, like Darius, exult over the open economy. But radicals like hotelier Vasant Chawla are bent on establishing
Hindu dominion over Muslims, giving precedence to religious fanaticism over the law. On the other hand, the views of moderate Hindus are voiced by Dr. Kanitkar –

“Nothing in Hinduism would justify breaking one place of worship to build another...Babri masjid is three hundred years old. Why not build a Ram temple next to it?” (p. 69)

4.2.4.2. A Nation in Darkness –

After comprehensively sketching the build-up to the communal crisis, the novel moves towards the riots that break out all over India, especially in Bombay, as the movement to build a Ram Temple in Ayodhya gains momentum. The epicentre of the Bombay riots is Asia’s largest slum, Dharavi, full of enterprise and passions. Pervez and her friends try to sensitize the ignorant masses against self-seeking religious fundamentalists. But the Shiv Sena infiltrates into the slums, hindering peace movements and rousing religious passions. Characters from Dharavi testify to the explosive situation. Soon, the upper class also senses the heat of the communal tensions. A peace march is organised at Chowpatty, wherein politicians and students, industrialists and elite ladies, religious leaders and film stars, fishermen and domestic servants, all march together.

After the Allahabad High Court permits the Uttar Pradesh state government to acquire land for building the Ram Temple, Pervez’s activist friends Siddharth and Pawan visit Ayodhya and bring disturbing news. Ayodhya, a town where Hindus and Muslims lived amicably for centuries, has ten thousand Ram temples and numerous mosques. An eighty-four year old Muslim priest claims that the Babri Mosque had been used by Muslims since 1885. Shastri Laldas, chief priest of the Ram Temple admits to placing an idol of Lord Rama inside the mosque in 1949, after receiving divine instructions in a dream shared by many. However both Hindus and Muslims resent the opportunistic political interference of BJP and Congress parties. The BJP’s strength in Parliament increases from two to eighty-five seats, after raking up the Ramjanmabhumi issue. After the court order, local residents are forced to give their lands to the Ram Temple complex without compensation. Nevertheless, Pawan and Siddharth return with a positive image of the Indian people-

“The people...were wonderful...Both Hindus and Muslims told us they’ve been celebrating each others’ festivals, attending each others’ weddings, helping each other through sickness and death....They’re determined not to let outsiders disrupt their lives.” (p. 128)
Meher Pestonji then recounts the 1992 Bombay riots from first-hand experience. Video parlours show speeches of right-wing Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) leaders. Muslims are provoked by derogatory references. If Shiv Sena activists place Hindu idols in Muslim localities, Muslim leaders plan to erect their dargahs or shrines in Hindu areas. The minority Muslim community feels betrayed by the Congress government in the state which has surrendered to the whims of the Shiv Sena. The country at large is pervaded by barbarism. Shiv Sena men pour tar on the pitch to stop an India-Pakistan cricket match. The Muslim Jamaat orders a woman to be publicly lashed for adultery. Yet, there are enlightened voices terming both Hindu and Muslim fundamentalists as equally dangerous and the failure to condemn them as condonation. The ordinary citizen desires only peace and harmony.

On 6 December 1992, the nation is shocked as karsevaks (volunteers of extremist Hindu groups) demolish the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya while the government remains a mute spectator. Unprecedented riots erupt all over India. Pestonji focuses on Dharavi - one of the worst-hit areas in Bombay. As news of the demolition pours in, grieving, insecure and belligerent Muslims start preparing for war. Shiv Sena workers march through the streets shouting pro-Hindu and anti-Muslim slogans. Soon, rampaging mobs go on a killing spree. Weapons range from stones, knives and sticks to torches, swords, guns and crude bombs. None is spared – neither the sick nor women, neither elderly nor infants. Dharavi resembles a ghost town as terror grips the masses. In Mahim and Santa Cruz, only the badly injured or dazed are seen outdoors. At Deonar, Muslims are slaughtered. Hindu, Muslim and Christian families struggle to protect women and children, attend to the injured and bury the dead.

Meher Pestonji describes the riots from her twin perspectives as social activist and journalist. She airs her strong feelings through her shocked and grieving heroine Pervez –

“For all their good intentions, neither the government nor the Gandhians, nor the leading lights of every religion and profession had managed to stymie the holocaust.... Devastation had hit the whole nation. Each morning’s headlines horrified as the death toll mounted in state after state. ..........Another surprise was parallel violence in Pakistan and Bangladesh where Muslims attacked temples in retaliation for Babri masjid.....Whether Hindu attacked Muslim or vice versa was irrelevant. What mattered was hundreds of lives lost, thousands of families afflicted by grief, devastated homes, destroyed means of livelihood.”(p.203, 204)

As riot victims line up for paltry government compensation, tragic stories surface. The plight of the minorities is brought alive by a Muslim man who struggles to identify the corpse of his innocent son, shot dead in police custody. As someone puts it at a peace meeting,
“This was not a Hindu-Muslim riot, it was a police-Muslim riot.” (p.225)

Overcoming his anti-sensationalism, Pervez’s co-activist Siddharth publishes his gruesome photos of the riots, in order to stir people. Such is the magnitude of the violence that hundreds are killed in a single slum and even grandmothers are raped. Then there is Sabina, the news reporter who returns from Ayodhya with a fractured arm and recounts how power-hungry fundamentalist politicians had destroyed the Babri Mosque -

“People like ants, crawling all over the place. Leaders egging on karsevaks, shouting slogans like ‘Ek dhakka aur do, Babri masjid tod do.’ BJP, VHP leaders watching without batting an eyelid...” (p. 222)

The vicious violence in Bombay continues. Army and special police Platoons are pressed into service. Government hospitals are crowded with bleeding victims. Newly-married brides are widowed. Women keep watch at nights frightening away intruders. In Jogeshwari, Hindu families are burnt alive. Extortion, robbery and usurpation abound. Muslims are arrested and terrorized. The Koran is desecrated. The police machinery surrenders to political gangsters. Power is grossly abused. Personal vendetta becomes easy. The fresh outbreaks of violence are more sinister. Saamna, the Shiv Sena’s newspaper encourages annihilation of Muslims. The government remains passive as Shiv Sainiks wreak havoc –

“Following an editorial declaring ‘The next few days will be ours’, Sainiks stormed the streets. Muslim homes and business establishments were targeted as never before....areas with a dominant Muslim population went up in flames. Black smoke hovered...enveloping Bombay in the darkest days of its existence. ...The state chief minister attending the Assembly session in Nagpur took two days to fly back to Bombay. The defence minister flew down from Delhi and returned within hours. The army stood on alert without instructions to act. ...Violence petered out only after Saamna carried another editorial triumphantly proclaiming ‘A lesson has been taught’.” (p.249)

Subsequently, there is a great exodus of Muslims from Bombay.

The novelist also captures the far-reaching implications of the riots. The Hindu community is in a dilemma - perplexed by anti-Muslim propaganda and emotionally blackmailed in the name of religion. Helpless moderates like Dr. Kanitkar feel guilty for the uncondonable crimes. He regrets Muslims being punished for sixteenth century Mughal emperor Babar’s alleged action of razing a temple and building a mosque over it. He laments,

“Hawks get militant when moderates remain silent. We intellectuals are guilty of abandoning our religion to fanatics and fundamentalists.” (p.231)
The economy suffers as business losses in the financial capital Bombay mount to three hundred crores per day. The reign of fanatics scares away foreign investors.

Amid the beastliness and gloom, secular forces fighting for peace and unity offer hope. Pervez represents ordinary civilians who oppose divisive forces. From the time the tensions begin, to the peak of the rioting and even after peace is restored, Pervez and her companions engage in selfless social work, offering material aid and emotional succour to victims. They reconcile people of varied creeds, castes and classes. They unleash a strong campaign against self-seeking communal politicians. Throughout the novel, Meher Pensonji refers to the valiant efforts of civil society groups such as Sahamat, Anhad, Communalism Combat and Citizens for Justice and Peace with whom she was closely associated. Peace Committees and prayer meetings are organized in each locality with the support of community leaders. Hindu and Muslim neighbours who have saved each other’s lives agree that retributive violence is self-destructive and is engineered by outsiders. There is an open dialogue and even policemen apologize for police atrocities. The novel feels only such initiatives really matter.

The potential of subaltern groups is manifested through Pervez who is a woman from the minority Parsi community. The role of Parsis during the national crisis is analysed. The novelist equates their neutrality to cowardice. A scathing attack is made on Parsis in Malcolm Baug who refuse to shelter Muslims, leaving them to be burnt alive. Pervez, angered by the non-interference of her community, deliberates on how individuals like her could bring sanity to people driven insane by the communal virus. On the other hand, the novel appreciates Parsi families who protect their Muslim neighbours from rioters. Parsi industrialist Ratan Tata’s bold, secular stand is lauded. The novelist, herself a Parsi, emphasizes that Parsis should affirm themselves and act as peace-makers between Hindu and Muslim communities.

Even as commoners valiantly struggle to restore normalcy, Bombay is rocked by serial bomb blasts in March 1993 – an act of retribution by the Muslim underworld. The soul of the nation is shaken and Bombay the heart of the Indian economy comes to a standstill. The novelist salutes the courage that helps the shattered city to rise again -

“As the city of her birth was torn apart by twelve bombs in two hours, Pervez, like thousands of citizens, had been galvanised into proving Bombay’s resilient spirit could not be destroyed. Blood banks filled within hours. Volunteers set up patrols helping families trace missing persons. Pamphlets were printed overnight cautioning people against the dreaded RDX.” (p.315-316)
Professionals, activists, artists, businessmen unite to raise public morale. People of all classes and creeds join hands for miles and sing the national anthem -

“A strange tenor crept over Bombay. Citizens waiting for four o’clock when a siren would sound. Unitng them as they were before the violence that tore them apart. A unity that could at best be fragile in the hours after trust is lost. Yet it is yearned for. And in the yearning lies hope. ...... The human chain would link citizens to one another, graphically symbolising the united spirit of Bombay that prided itself in its cosmopolitan character. ...A characteristic indispensible for Bombay to remain the commercial capital of the nation. ...... People raised clasped arms skyward... imploring benedictions... ‘Jaya jaya jaya jaya hey!’ they roared in one voice. Followed by pin-drop silence. As if the gods had descended in response. ...For a few moments people stood motionless, mesmerised by their own voices. Slowly they dispersed.” (p.287, 288, 293)

4.2.4.3. Changing India and Continuance of Communalism –

Pervez is essentially a novel about Bombay and by extension, about Indian cities changed by the communalization of politics, the politicization of religion and by capitalist globalization. In the epilogue, Pestonji differentiates between old, genial Bombay and its new version- greedy, materialistic Mumbai. Ten years after the nineties holocaust, the twenty-first century sees genocide repeated in Gujarat. Pestonji makes a bold political statement through journalist Siddharth who discovers that the riots at Godhra are started by cleverly pitting innocent, devout Hindus and Muslims against each other. The truth remains hidden in an impenetrable veil of conspiracies and confusion, lies and rumours. Siddharth states,

“This is genocide actively sponsored by the state. Everywhere we went Muslims were being burnt alive to replicate the horror Hindus must have suffered on the train. In some place ministers and government officers were actually leading mobs. Other times the state was passively guilty with policemen standing by as mobs plundered, looted, killed. ...... It’s part of a well-orchestrated game plan worked on for years...Ever since the BJP came to power they’ve been pushing Hindutva ideology rather than running the state. Encouraging government servants to join the RSS, promoting officers who toe their line, introducing Hindutva ideas into school and college textbooks. ...... Today it’s Gujarat. Ten years later it’ll be the whole of India.” (p.304, 305)

Pestonji is stinging in her criticism of the Gujarat government. A small boy’s account is used to narrate the infamous Quasarbi case where a pregnant Muslim woman’s womb is ripped open. Though world-wide condemnation pours in, the picture is one of despair -

“Two months after Godhra, killings continued unabated with the chief minister remaining securely in the saddle while his goons ran amok around the state. It took two months for Bombay’s powerful citizens to wake up and...protest. A flaccid response to genocide. Yet it was important. Without protests the steaming
communal cauldron would erupt into larger confabulations...inwardly she was raging over the helplessness of civil society in the face of organised crime. Her poster, denouncing the Chief Minister as Chief Murderer, had been torn into shreds by a policewoman. In frustration Pervez spat into a gutter near the policewoman’s foot, a gesture she had never contemplated earlier.” (p. 316)

The vicious impact of communal politics initiated in the 1990s on national life continues.

Several post-colonial issues are also discussed. The entire novel mirrors the repercussions of the colonial divide and rule policy which encouraged Hindu-Muslim animosity. The epilogue is proof of the continuance of imperialism in the guise of capitalism-

“The march into the twenty-first century.....had also changed people. ‘Yeh Dil Mange More’, ‘Feed Your Greed’, ‘Shop Till You Drop’. Modern mantras plastered across Mumbai’s billboards. Bombay would have been embarrassed by them... A city of old-world courtesies. With pride in multiplicity, tolerance, enterprise.....In just about a decade Bombay had transformed from a benevolent giant with a belly big enough for all into Mumbai where empty-headed socialites vied for space on Page Three......With the glamourisation of trivia came the deadening of minds. And decline in ethical judgement.” (p.295, 296)

The way ahead is also shown by the novelist –

“Impossible to move the clock back. But imperative to sift grain from chaff. And make space for grain to take root again. Despite cemented soil.” (p.296)

4.2.5. The Artistic Perspective –

In *Pervez-A Novel*, private trauma and public struggles blend effortlessly as the life of the heroine Pervez and the national crises of 1992-93 are juxtaposed. The agony of Pervez, a divorcée, who in the prime of her life finds her world shattered, is captured well. Pushed to the margins of traditional society, she tries to escape from painful memories. The novel debates changing definitions of love and marriage, shallowness of contemporary relationships, and the hard life of modern educated women. Returning to Bombay in the 1990s, Pervez’s sensitive soul is seared by loneliness and by the communal turmoil in the nation. She struggles to find meaning and truth in life. The encounter with social activists creates a dilemma in her. While austerity is attractive, it is hard to practise. A chance experiment with a different way of life leads to a seminal change. She rebels against the elite class to which she belongs by joining the ranks of the middle and lower classes. She tries to overcome her inhibitions as she realizes that working for social reform is fraught with danger. Her untamed spirit finds succour in nature. She feels that her bitter experiences have liberated her. A poetess, she empathizes with the poor but also knows how the rich can cry for love.
She epitomizes the need for flexibility, moderation and reconciliation in national life. Since she subscribes to no dogma or ideology, she can bridge the world of the rich with that of the poor. The author uses nature imagery to portray her anguish as commoners turn into heartless rioters, the world around burns and human relations change forever. Yet, she stands out in her ability to transform personal tragedy into social dedication. Personal loss paves the way for national gain. She overcomes despair and channelizes her anger in the right direction. She voices the existential dilemma of the individual citizen vis-à-vis national destiny:

“Each life is no more significant to the city than a grain of sand to the sea....yet vitally significant to those one shares life with...... are people at the mercy of fate, like sand perennially pounded by the sea?” (p 285)

Secondly, in her masterly depiction of the Bombay riots, Meher Pestonji admirably expresses the pain of a nation forcibly divided along communal lines. The narrative is marked by sorrow for a fast-changing nation losing its tolerance and peace due to divisive politics. The appalling human depravity during the riots is always juxtaposed with the never-say-die spirit of Mumbai which triumphs over hatred. Still, trust once breached, is never the same again. The young Muslim boy Munnawar is bent on leaving Bombay. What is roguishness to Pervez is survival strategy to Munnawar who is both rioter and victim. The secular ideology of the elite becomes impossible to implement in the life and death struggle of the slums. The conflict is resolved when Pervez swings into decisive action, targeting communalists. In the final analysis, the resilience and desire for peace on the part of the citizen redeems the nation.

In the epilogue dealing with the Gujarat riots of 2002, the escalating communalism in the country is contrasted with past riots since the protagonists remain the same. The novel ends on a rather disturbing note with the nation, the civil society and state machinery, humanity itself, ravaged by religious passions and communal politics. The novel goes beyond the Hindu-Muslim conflict to a universal idea of true religion based on humanism. Also, several instances in the novel prove that Pestonji believes in using all forms of art to broaden the mind and thus combat communalism.

To sum up the stylistic merits, the characterization is strong with real and diverse characters. The language is a literal translation of the slang or dialect used by her characters - whether upper class or slum-dwellers, Goan villagers or poor Parsis. The authentic narration of history sounds mostly journalistic yet has poetic depth. The novelist imparts beauty to the tiny details of mundane life. She makes subtle use of metaphors drawn from nature to convey changing moods and the emptiness and rootlessness of humans of the new millennium.
4.2.6. Critical Review -

*Pervez* is a novel that weaves together several vital national issues. It poignantly portrays the dilemma of the citizen caught between regressive and progressive forces in the nineties. The destiny of the heroine becomes synonymous with that of the nation. It is a rare instance of the fictional depiction of an Indian woman influencing the socio-political scene. Pervez's rebelliousness and initiative challenges conventional images of the third-world woman.

At the outset, the backdrop of the national communal crisis is thoroughly analysed. Each important event is debated through characters representing different ideologies. The tensions arising from L.K.Adfani's *Rath Yatra*, the rise of religious orthodoxy and patriarchy, the increasing class and caste conflicts, the resurgence of the battered economy - references to all these offer a comprehensive picture of the paradoxes of the nineties. It is worth noting that the controls-ridden economic structure had created a massive fiscal and debt crisis in 1991, pushing India into initiating revolutionary economic reforms, led by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao and finance minister Manmohan Singh. Gurcharan Das writes, “The economic revolution that Narasimha Rao launched in the middle of 1991 may well be more important than the political revolution that Jawaharlal Nehru initiated in 1947” (Das 213). This involved fiscal corrections, liberalisation of trade and industry, public sector reform and encouragement of foreign investment, thus equipping the economy to participate advantageously in globalisation. As a result, the economy saw a growth-rate of over seven percent with agriculture, industries and commerce doing very well. Foreign direct investment and foreign exchange reserves improved and the debt situation moved away from crisis. Unfortunately, the religious conflagration in 1992 came as a blow to the economy.

The novel documents the subtle ways in which communal politics enters the social arena and feeds on societal evils and disparities. Caste and gender discrimination as also class-conflicts weaken the social fabric and prepare fertile ground for religious extremism to take root in frustrated minds. The increasing repression of women by patriarchal religious traditions is a precursor to communal conflict. Pestonji cites the example of the Shah Bano case to demonstrate the gross injustice meted out to divorced Muslim women by the Shariat law. She also condemns the glorification of *sati* or widow-burning by Hindu fanatics. The feminists and secularists find themselves facing a common enemy. Historians opine that in the nineties most legal rights extended to women remained on paper and government efforts met with stiff opposition from religious communities as in the Shah Bano case (Chandra
Again, Tanika Sarkar opines that Hindu communalism works through carefully nurtured cultural organisations. The right-wing Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) which advocates domesticity and gender subordination for women, brings them forward as defenders of Hindu tradition during communal conflagrations. (Sarkar 131-159).

Just before the nationwide riots erupt, the novelist revisits the root cause of the Hindu-Muslim dispute - the Ayodhya issue. Her analysis of ground realities in the holy city of Ayodhya is objective. According to historians, Ayodhya, regarded as the birthplace of the Hindu deity Lord Rama, is an ancient city in Uttar Pradesh where both Hindus and Muslims revere Rama. Muslim rulers of yore had patronised Ayodhya and there are several temples built and managed by Muslims. However the atmosphere has been vitiated by the entry of corruption, money and politics into religious life (Nandy 1-5). A mosque was built by the Mughal emperor Babur at Ayodhya in the early sixteenth century. Some Hindus claimed in the nineteenth century that it was built over a temple marking the birthplace of Rama. In December 1949, a district magistrate permitted few Hindus to install idols in the mosque. When the central government condemned the action, the state government barred the mosque to both Hindus and Muslims, referring the dispute to the courts. Since the eighties, extremist Hindu organisations led by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) started a whirlwind campaign to demolish the mosque and erect a temple in its place. In February 1986, the district judge, prompted by the Congress Chief Minister, permitted Hindus to worship in the mosque, resulting in widespread riots. In the late 1980s, the right-wing political outfit BJP gained power by making the Ram Temple its official agenda and rousing the Hindu community with its all-India Rath Yatra. The BJP-VHP organized a huge rally of two lakh volunteers at the site of the mosque on 6th December, 1992. Despite government assurances that the mosque would be protected, BJP-VHP volunteers demolished the mosque with hammer blows while their leaders watched. The central government lay paralysed and the country was stunned. Historians consider the destruction of the Babri Masjid as a watershed in the politics of independent India. According to Meghnad Desai, “This was the most blatant act of defiance of the law in modern Indian history, and the Indian state has stood by helpless or, worse still, approving.....After the demolition of the Babri Masjid, Indian politics lost its innocence.” (Desai 398,400) All these historical events are mirrored by Pestonji, chiefly through characters who visit Ayodhya before and after the Babri demolition. They mention the discontent of the prominent Hindu and Muslim leaders as also commoners in Ayodhya with the interference of opportunistic politicians in the Ayodhya dispute. The same findings, based
on interviews with the persons concerned, are echoed by Ashis Nandy and others in their seminal historical work *Creating a Nationality – The Ramjanmabhumi Movement and Fear of the Self*.

Meher Pestonji was actively involved as a peace activist and relief worker during the Bombay riots. She unfailingly records both the horrors as also the nobility and courage of ordinary Hindus and Muslims. According to historical accounts which corroborate her narration, immediately after the demolition of the Babri Mosque, communal riots, the worst since Partition, broke out all over India, the worst hit being Bombay, Calcutta and Bhopal. The riots in Bombay lasted for nearly a month. In all more than three thousand people were killed (Chandra 611). Historian Ramchandra Guha opines that Bombay was the city worst affected. His references to attacks on Hindus on Mohammad Ali road and Jogeshwari and targeting of Muslims in Dharavi resemble the accounts in the novel (Guha 641-643). Pestonji’s fears of the long-term impact of the riots have been widely echoed. Dileep Padgaonkar’s book *When Bombay Burned* described Bombay as a permanently altered, deeply divided city at war with itself. Columnist Behram Contractor wrote, “the bigger tragedy...is...that...Bombay’s reputation as a free-living and high-swinging city, absorbing people from all communities and all parts of India, is gone for ever”(qtd. in Guha 641-643).

Meher Pestonji’s documentation of the Bombay riots stands out for its focus on the human angle, on the physical and psychological toll of the disaster. She also suggests from personal experience how traditionally subaltern groups and commoners can use ingenious methods to defeat opportunistic politicians and religious fanatics. The foregrounding of the positive contribution of civil society groups and non-government organisations in restoring harmony, the detailed and heartfelt rendering of the slums, the unsparing indictment of the failure of the Congress government which surrendered to anti-social elements, the bold exposure of the negative role of extremist regional political parties like the Shiv Sena, impartial analysis of the role of the upper class and of the Parsi community, and the cathartic and electrifying depiction of Bombay fighting back and asserting its true ethos of universal harmony in the wake of the serial blasts – all these contribute to the uniqueness of Pestonji’s narrative.

In the epilogue, even as India steps into the new millennium, Pestonji offers a bleak picture of the continuing fatal mingling of religion and politics, which retards national progress. She laments the near extinction of humaneness in a nation pervaded by the commercial, materialist, fiercely competitive spirit of Western globalization. According to
economist Jayati Ghosh the final thrust for the upsurge of communalism came from the cultural and economic crisis generated by globalisation. Contrary to expectations, globalisation based on the capitalist and colonial structures only made the rich, richer and the poor, poorer, creating deep and pervasive inequalities everywhere. The celebration of consumerist culture increased the discontent of the have-nots who sought refuge in a homogenous religious identity and directed their frustration against more vulnerable enemies at home, thus benefitting Hindutva politics immensely (Ghosh 107-130).

Pestonji’s account of the 2002 Gujarat riots is emotional yet objective, resembling those of noted historians and journalists. Ever since the BJP government assumed power in Delhi in 1999, thousands of volunteers had been brought to Ayodhya to revive the Ram Temple issue. On 27 February 2002, the Sabarmati express full of volunteers returning from Ayodhya, halted at the Godhra station in Gujarat, where an altercation took place between passengers and Muslim vendors. Shortly after the train left the station, a bogey caught fire, killing fifty-eight volunteers. What followed was a systematic hunting down and annihilation of Muslim families, establishments and religious places by organised gangs of Hindu fundamentalists, involving arson, murder, rape and loot. The violence spread all over Gujarat and lasted for several months. The connivance of the BJP state government with the rioters invited scathing condemnation from the media, opposition parties, civilian groups and the international community. Even after a fragile peace was restored, the bleeding wounds of the impoverished, humiliated and terrorised victims were evident in the reports of the Supreme Court, the National Human Rights Commission, the Election Commission and other constitutional bodies, which found the Gujarat government guilty on numerous counts. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, then Prime Minister of India, described the riots as a black mark on the nation’s forehead which had lowered India’s prestige in the world. Meher Pestonji accuses the Chief Minister and government of Gujarat of orchestrating an anti-Muslim genocide. Prof. Bipan Chandra writes, “...what distinguished the events of 2002 was that, unlike a typical riot situation in which two groups engage in, usually spontaneous violence, the assault was one-sided, pre-meditated, brutal, and supported or facilitated by the state”(Chandra 623). Pestonji also captures the efforts, rage and helplessness of secular groups and the belated yet strong reactions of the powerful. As historians observe, “The state government, police and bureaucracy connived or remained silent spectators while thousands of Muslims were murdered or hounded and made homeless. But then other segments of India’s civil society and state institutions stood up and fought” (Chandra xii).
4.2.7. Summing Up: The Struggle for Harmony -

Meher Pestonji’s *Pervez* is her fictional autobiography, an attempt to retell national history from a feminine perspective. The protagonist represents those citizens who are disprivileged on account of their minority status or gender identity. It is the deeply moving saga of an ordinary woman who finds in her personal tragedies, the extraordinary strength to bring about positive social change. It is based on Pestonji’s experiences as a journalist and social activist in Bombay of the nineties, especially her involvement with the slum-dwellers of Dharavi and anti-communalism campaigns. It draws on her extensive interviews with riot-victims and is dedicated to those who showed exemplary courage in restoring communal harmony and accompanied her to riot-hit areas. *Pervez* is a thought-provoking work by a self-confessed rebel who sensitively criticizes public omissions and commissions, hoping that Indians find an antidote to communalism. The epigraph of the novel salutes the defiant spirit of ordinary Indians struggling for peace, progress and justice in the face of onslaughts by dark forces:

“Throughout the monsoon there’ll be
Brave fisher folk battling the sea
Defying each storm
To take a catch home

They’re a part of
the rhythm of
the sea.”


4.3.1. The Novelist –

Born in 1958 in Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu, David Davidar graduated from Madras Christian College. In the eighties and nineties, he worked as journalist or columnist for *Himmat, Keynote* and *Gentleman* magazines and the *Hindu* newspaper. In 1985, after obtaining his diploma in publishing from Harvard, Davidar joined Penguin publishers as one of the founder members of Penguin India. He edited and published several famous authors including Arundhati Roy, Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor, Khushwant Singh, Rohinton Mistry and Salman Rushdie. Moving to Penguin Canada in 2004, he published Philip Roth, Khaled Hosseini, Nadine Gordimer, Amitav Ghosh and others. In 2010 he returned to India to co-found Aleph Book Company in partnership with Rupa Publications India. David Davidar has
authored numerous articles, book reviews, poems and short stories. His novels grapple with the vastness and complexity of India. His debut novel *The House of Blue Mangoes* (2002) is a grand narrative covering fifty years of south Indian history. An international best-seller, it was published in translation in sixteen countries. His second novel *The Solitude of Emperors* (2007) was short-listed for a regional Commonwealth Writers Prize. His third novel *Ithaca* (2011) is set in the world of international publishing.

4.3.2. The Novel –

David Davidar's *The Solitude of Emperors* documents India of the nineties marked by economic liberation and by communal violence stemming from the Ram Temple versus Babri Mosque dispute in Ayodhya. A novel in two parts, it expresses anguish and outrage at extremism and fanaticism, and calls for a return to the secular, pluralistic heritage of India and the ideals of the freedom struggle. It exhorts the new generation to embrace a deeper vision of life and thereby cultivate tolerance and understanding –

"We do not know what to do with one of our most precious resources, solitude, and so we fill it with noise and clutter." (p.204)

Jai Arjun Singh describes *The Solitude of Emperors* as an earnest book of big ideas, wherein Davidar has taken the risk of offering a message regarding burning issues (Singh 8).

4.3.3. The Personal and the National –

4.3.3.1. Part One: Bombay (1991-1993) –

The prologue to *The Solitude of Emperors* reveals that the novel focuses on the complex relationship between individual and society, citizen and state, between commoners and the mighty currents of history. The novel opens with these lines:

"They are the invisible ones, the ones who were too small, weak, poor or slow to escape the onrush of history. No obituaries mark their passing, no memorials honour their name and we don't remember them because in our eyes they never existed. Yet we ignore them at our peril, if only because their fate today could be ours tomorrow; history is an insatiable tyrant." (p.3)

*The Solitude of Emperors* is the story of Vijay, a journalist, whose destiny is shaped by larger national forces, who becomes part of the story he is covering, with disastrous consequences. The narrative begins with Vijay paying reverential homage to his beloved friend Noah. He
has written a book about the life and death of Noah, impartially recording the history of the subaltern which is usually falsified or overlooked in official government records.

The actual story begins in Vijay's small hometown in Tamil Nadu. He is desperate to escape its stagnant life. In the early 1990s, the family servant Raju is recruited by a Hindu right-wing organization during the Ayodhya movement. Urged by his father, young Vijay writes an article about the increasing power of sectarian politicians and sends it to the *Indian Secularist*, leading to his employment as a journalist by this small Bombay-based magazine. The over twenty years old *Indian Secularist* symbolizes the conscientious citizen’s war against unscrupulous leaders. It breaks no sensational stories and is printed on cheap paper but is admired for its informed and thought-provoking exposure of sectarian politics. In Bombay, eighty-three year old Rustom Sorabjee, the inspirational founder-editor of the magazine enlightens Vijay about the insidious politicisation and perversion of religious faith in India. He describes the communal hatred of the 1990s as the worst since Partition –

“...I have rarely despaired as much about the country’s future. ...communalism seems to have become an everyday thing.” (p.23)

Yet, in the disgust of youth like Vijay with national politics, Sorabjee sees a ray of hope. He believes in truthfulness and in a nurturing, liberating faith that is never malicious. He appreciates the rich version of secularism enshrined in the Indian Constitution -

“We practise secularism in the Indian sense .... while we remain true to our faith we tolerate every other faith....” (p.27)

Working for the *Indian Secularist*, Vijay falls in love with the raw energy of Bombay and learns to study and appreciate the greatness India’s diverse religions.

Vijay's idyllic life is disrupted by the 1992-1993 riots. Bombay turns into a city of fear after the Babri Mosque is demolished by Hindu fundamentalists. Vijay recalls,

"I and all the other inhabitants of the city were about to see our world rearranged in a way that would drive everything but fear from our minds.... a long comet’s tail of violence swung across the country...tens of thousands...were affected... no one was spared in an orgy of violence...unlike anything the city had ever seen. To make matters worse...the police either looked the other way or even encouraged the rioters...it was in December 1992 that Bombay lost its way. "(p.41, 43)
The *Indian Secularist* terms it the fourth greatest tragedy to befall independent India since the Partition riots, the assassination of Gandhiji and the 1984 anti-Sikh riots. It puts out a special issue decrying the Babri demolition and the riots engineered by the Hindu right-wing to gain political power. Vijay is desolate as he witnesses struggling immigrants to Bombay being butchered in the name of religion. As his frustration deepens, he seeks to get to the roots of the malaise. He does the unthinkable by going out to see a riot. He imagines writing an award-winning article anchored by the words of a dying riot victim. He witnesses horrible scenes of murder and arson and is spared only because of his sacred thread. For nearly two months, he is treated for physical and mental trauma, even as a second wave of violence erupts. He then joins his colleagues in collecting information to honour the forgotten dead.

The staff of the *Indian Secularist* contributes actively to restoring peace. However, they are shaken by the retributive bomb blasts planned by the Muslim underworld in March 1993. Vijay quails at the endless violence threatening the very existence of India. As he visits the blast sites, he is filled with rage and grief. Even Sorabjee despairs if a small secularist minority could defeat mighty forces destroying Indian pluralism. However, he vows,

"...if there is even one person left in the country to whom our message will make a difference, that person is the reason we will keep going."(p.59)

Finally, a fragile peace is restored. A year after the Babri demolition, the prayers of the tense citizens are answered. The *Indian Secularist* and numerous others join in investigating the catastrophe and doing their best to heal the wounds. Vijay retrospect over how one of India's most secular cities had been changed forever. He laments,

"...Bombay .... was broken, its industriousness and resilience a sham, a thin veil that covered the deep-seated fear and suspicion...Bombay would live and die on its streets ... even as they went about their daily lives its millions...wondered if they would be expected to sacrifice themselves for their city"(p.59)

4.3.3.2. Part Two: Meham (1993-1994) –

To recover from the shock of the riots, Vijay is sent by Mr. Sorabjee in December 1993 to Meham - a small town in the Nilgiri mountains in the south. The riots lead Mr. Sorabjee to revive his idea of a book for the youth titled *The Solitude of Emperors: Why Ashoka, Akbar and Gandhi Matter to Us Today?* Vijay is asked to review the manuscript. Unfortunately, the national unrest has reached Meham. A shrine called the Tower of God is made the object of dispute by a Bombay politician. Vijay’s assignment is to write a report on the situation.
Mr. Sorabjee's book mouths Davidar's philosophy of secularism and forms the crux of the novel. It is inspired by Indian thinker and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen's views. The first chapter ‘The Need for Emperors’ analyses how deeply Indians believe in their gods. However in crisis, people start exhibiting savage religious tendencies. Such communal violence had been defeated by Indian freedom-fighters who believed that –

“India had always been the most plural of countries, a country that contained the world....central Asian tribes, Mongol warlords, Portuguese adventurers, Arabian seamen, Chinese travellers, Buddhist princes, Jewish wanderers, British traders, Christian apostles, Macedonian soldiers...” (p.75)

Yet, when large numbers suffer poverty and a few enjoy unimaginable riches, politicians and rabble-rousers inflame the passions of have-nots. They cleverly convince people that religious fanaticism offers security. Their slogans delude masses who, instead of battling poverty and corruption, turn upon each other. Hence the need for leaders of true faith –

“What we need is an emperor of men, someone who is so strong, commanding, brilliant, secular, compassionate and valorous that the forces of darkness will shrink back, powerless to stop his onslaught.” (p.79)

Only three figures in Indian history have played this role –

"Ashoka, the Emperor of Renunciation; Akbar, the Emperor of Faith; and Gandhi, the Emperor of Truth.” (p.79)

They are men for all ages. They were deeply religious yet secular and dealt with religious conflict without losing their faith. Such leaders are vital for no atheist or agnostic can have an enduring vision for India.

The second chapter is about ‘Samraat Ashoka, the Emperor of Renunciation’, whose name shines like a star in the annals of world history. The terrible bloodshed in the Kalinga war resulted in the conversion of Emperor Ashoka. He renounced violence, embraced Buddhism and devoted himself to public welfare. Though a staunch Buddhist, he commanded that no man's faith be interfered with. He issued edicts exhorting each citizen not to glorify his own religion or to condemn the religion of another, but to learn about and honour all religions. Ashoka stands in sharp contrast to modern politicians-
“Which leader today would consider giving up his power – no matter how paltry when compared to the absolute power someone like Ashoka would have commanded – and devoting his life to the welfare of the people? How many politicians had resigned because of the riots that had broken out in Bombay and elsewhere after the mosque in Ayodhya was destroyed? One? Shouldn’t that make people angry, especially the young?” (p.100, 101)

The third chapter titled ‘Shahenshah Akbar, Emperor of Faith’ recaps the glorious reign of Mughal ruler Akbar. Though a Muslim, he took great interest in other faiths. He angered the orthodoxy by declaring all faiths to be true. He established the Ibadat Khana for inter-religious dialogue and a syncretic religion Din-i-Ilahi open to all. He was an Emperor of Faith who showed how faith could unite men, a man of God and a ruler of men, an emperor badly needed today. The fourth chapter is titled ‘Mahatma Gandhi, Emperor of Truth’. He was not born to greatness but commanded millions. He was unambiguous about the need for India to be a harmoniously plural society, where people of all faiths lived peacefully. He was killed by a Hindu fanatic because of his beliefs. A pious Hindu, he used the philosophy of Ahimsa (non-violence) and Satyagraha (truth) to free India from British rule -

“Therein lay his genius – articulating his strategies for winning freedom and maintaining the secularism of the nation through the medium of his faith.” (p.169)

Sadly, today, Gandhiji’s message is forgotten or mocked at.

The concluding chapter - 'The Solitude of Emperors' presents contemplation as the solution to religious fundamentalism. During crises, great men like Gandhi, Akbar and Ashoka derived strength and wisdom from introspection in solitude. Youth are exhorted to look within themselves and find direction through discipline and fortitude, to inhale the genius of India, to learn about her amazing beauty and diversity. They are further instructed –

“At the same time, do not neglect to absorb the poverty and violence and savagery and injustice of this country of extremes. Experience the despair of the coalminer in Dhanbad, where the very land is on fire, understand the hopelessness of the marginal cotton farmer in Andhra Pradesh, mourn with the widow of the Sikh garage owner who witnessed her husband being burnt alive in the Delhi riots of 1984. Let their pain become yours.” (p.210)

From this realization should come the passion to uplift the nation. The youth are called ‘Emperors of Everyday’ and urged to act courageously to defeat communalism, to selflessly
dedicate themselves to tolerance and equality. By emulating great souls, one of them might emerge as the Emperor who will redeem India. Sorabjee's book concludes with this line –

“The new emperor...will need to combine the renunciation if Ashoka, the syncretic abilities of Akbar and the truth of Gandhi..... He will need to add something...uniquely his own, for the problems of our time are more complex ....... he will have a vision so breathtakingly clear and innovative that it may not even be recognized immediately...” (p. 208)

Even as Vijay reads the manuscript of Mr. Sorabjee's book, communal tensions overshadow the beautiful hill-station of Meham, one of the numerous after-shocks of the demolition of the Babri Mosque. The prominent citizens of Meham are retired government and army officers whose lives revolve around clubs and gardens. On the highest peak in Meham stands an ancient, miraculous Christian shrine, visited by people of all faiths. Called 'The Tower of God', it is mostly inaccessible due to rough weather and the risky climb on slippery stone steps. In Meham, Vijay befriends Noah, a socially ostracised young poet living in the local graveyard as its keeper. He is the rebellious mocker of the elite, friend of the poor, the humane philosopher of Meham. As Noah and Vijay become close friends, communal trouble starts brewing. Hindu radicalists led by right-wing politician Rajan claim that the Tower of God was an ancient Shiva temple, stealthily usurped by Christians.

Aware of Rajan’s plans to gain political mileage by engineering riots, Vijay sets out to preserve the secular fabric. His risky intervention leads to unforeseen consequences. Despite knowing that he is no match for the sly and powerful Rajan, he decides to confront him. With Noah’s help he alerts local officials, police and influential citizens. But his warnings are ignored. Finally, Vijay interviews Rajan, the Bombay businessman turned politician. He is a self-made man, a popular philanthropist and charismatic leader, rising from being a vagabond in Meham to a multi-millionaire. But, Vijay’s probing questions reveal that he is a bitter man seeking to avenge the humiliation of his family by the upper class. His wrath finds outlet in religious fundamentalism and he is allegedly involved in the Bombay riots. He symbolizes the dangerously rotten political culture of contemporary India. Even as Rajan plans a riot to take over the shrine with the connivance of the police, Vijay finds himself fighting a losing battle. The local officials are apathetic and the police threaten to arrest Vijay for troubling Rajan. On the other side stands Brother Ahimas, the old caretaker of the shrine. A holy man, he refuses to organize resistance or request protection and is reconciled to divine will.
Helpless, Vijay urges Noah to ‘do’ something. Vijay is frantic because he can clearly visualize Meham spattered with innocent blood but cannot even organize a peace march. When Noah refuses to intervene, he loses his composure and Noah is cut to the core by his harsh words. Though they part in anger, the god within Noah finally awakens. Inspired by Mr. Sorabjee’s book, Vijay decides to fight all alone.

On 5 January 1994, members of the Hindu right-wing Kadavul Katchi party gather at the base of the Tower of God, scared to ascend the peak in misty weather. Rajan proceeds alone on his mission to convert the shrine into a temple with the help of his ferocious rioters. But Noah, along with the small band of youth defending the shrine, lies in wait. When Rajan ascends the slippery steps, planning to secretly install a lingam at the shrine to prove that it had been a Hindu temple, Noah confronts him. They wrestle and fall to their death in the deep valley below. Ultimately, good triumphs over evil, but as in a Shakespearean tragedy, good is destroyed along with evil. Only Rajan’s shattered body is recovered. Noah’s ripped shirt is buried by close friends. He becomes a martyr for secularism, averting the massacre of innocents and preventing communal hatred from taking root. His sacrifice goes unrecognized but Vijay bears witness how the social outcaste became a saviour.

Guilty about Noah’s death, Vijay despairs at the state of India. He is comforted by Mr. Sorabjee who praises Noah as the heroic Emperor of Everyday and Vijay as the catalyst that led him to his true mission. Ironically, both Noah and Vijay, for their own reasons, keep aloof from religion. Yet both embody true religion. Vijay leaves for Canada. Here he pens the story of Noah. Noah’s end becomes the defining moment of his life. After a decade of isolation, Vijay thinks of returning to India to take up his unfulfilled mission of promoting secularism.

4.3.4. Documenting National History –
4.3.4.1. The Beginnings –

The Solitude of Emperors is set in Bombay and in the Nilgiris during 1991-1994. The story begins in Vijay’s hometown in Tamil Nadu. It is a microcosm of India in the nineties - teeming with backward towns and villages, yet on the way to massive urbanization and globalization. Vijay symbolizes educated, unemployed rural youth, frustrated by socialist edifices, casteism and religious segregation and eager to escape to the freedom of metropolises. Since his educated parents are ostracised for their revolutionary step of marrying across the caste-divide, Vijay inherits their grouse towards caste and religious
divides. In Vijay’s nondescript town, the swift percolation of communal politics throughout India is reflected by the recruitment of impoverished youth by fundamentalists. The commoners are perplexed by the extremist movement to demolish the Babri mosque and build a Ram Temple in Ayodhya because,

“....it seemed calculated to bring ordinary Hindus out on to the streets to avenge themselves on their Muslim neighbours for a centuries-old insult that neither party had had anything to do with.” (p.16)

Many educated middle-class professionals like Vijay’s father explode in anger -

“Abominable...These people are giving...us Hindus a bad name.” (p.17)

National media, busy reporting the communal disturbances along the route of right-wing BJP leader Advani’s Rath Yatra, neglects the dangers emerging elsewhere in the country.

4.3.4.2. In Bombay –

In Bombay where protagonist Vijay joins the newspaper run by committed secularist Rustom Sorabjee, Davidar delves further into the explosive national situation. He depicts the charm of old world Bombay, only to contrast it later with the pathos of the 1992 riots. The scale of the violence is unprecedented. Fundamentalists and fanatics rip the social fabric. Friends and neighbours become enemies and traitors. It becomes hard to distinguish between victims and perpetrators. Panic and rumours rule the roost. The early temptations of Vijay point to how most media persons succumb to sensationalism in reporting the riots. The elites party nonchalantly until rioters reach their doorstep. Davidar also recounts the peace efforts of citizens. The shattering effect of the serial bomb blasts and the valiant response to it are recorded. The novelist emphasizes two contradictory aspects— the resilience of the masses and the bitter truth that there is no alternative other than endurance. As Vijay observes,

“The trains and buses ran packed to capacity every day, office workers and mill hands and shoppers and hawkers...went about their daily routine, but it was only because they had no option but to go to work in order to feed their families; they did not have the luxury of staying at home and building bomb shelters and stocking them with ....grapefruit juice and low-fat yogurts as their counterparts in a Western city might have done.” (p.59)
The after-shocks of the 1992-93 riots reverberate all over India. When, scarred by the Bombay riots, Vijay goes for a holiday to the southern hill-station of Meham, the spectre of communalism returns to haunt him. Here, against the backdrop of growing inter-religious tensions, Vijay starts proof-reading the manuscript of his editor Rustom Sorabjee’s textbook meant to inculcate patriotism, secularism and tolerance among youngsters. This inspiring book serves to affirm the all-inclusive nature of Indian civilization by tracing the glorious history of Indian secularism. It traces the root causes of the upsurge of communalism in the nineties and offers a vital vision for the nation’s future.

Meham exemplifies how religious intolerance was fuelled by economic crisis in the early nineties. A squalid town, it is an ideal breeding ground for communalism. Behind the deceptive peace is the massive divide between haves and have-nots. Places of worship and unemployed, frustrated youth abound. Davidar also suggests that the rise of communalism in South Indian towns like Meham was part of the fundamentalist agenda to spread their poison beyond the North. Since the 1980s, Hindu extremists had circulated lists of minority holy places that had allegedly belonged to the majority. The three hundred year old Tower of God, a confluence of myth and history, stands on the thin dividing line between faith and fanaticism. The shrine which houses the relics of two Christian martyrs, is popular for its miracles among people of all faiths. In 1992, encouraged by the demolition of the Babri Mosque, the local MLA with a band of hooligans had marched against the shrine, reviving an old rumour that the shrine had originally been a Hindu temple. The police inspector who had dealt toughly with them was transferred. On the first anniversary of the Babri demolition, the right-wing party Kadavul Katchi had revived the agitation, led by local politician Rajan who aimed to rise to power with Hindu votes.

Rajan personifies the suave new-age fundamentalist politician, the engine driving the juggernaut of communalism. He hides behind an impenetrable mask of public service. In reality, he uses religion for personal aggrandizement. He embodies the Hindutva doctrine of the nineties which sought to give India a singular Hindu identity by subduing all minority groups. Davidar terms its practitioners as traitors. As Vijay tells Rajan,

“You claim to be a patriot who is prepared to die for his country, but you do not seem to mind killing your own. ..... No country which targets its own people has
ever prospered.... Most fundamentalist regimes have fallen sooner or later, after creating fear and mistrust, and ruining their countries.” (p. 177 - 179)

Ultimately, Rajan too is depicted as a product of the anger of the have-nots. He can never forget his millworker father who had worked meekly all his life only to die starving, humiliated and anguished, leaving Rajan to fend for the family. Rajan says of his father,

“In him I saw the silent, voiceless, powerless face of the majority... That is the power we are about to unleash, the energy of the majority, the hundreds of millions without dreams or any means of rising above their dismal lives.” (p.183)

Rajan’s real motivation to attack the Christian shrine is that years ago, a Christian boss had unjustly dismissed him from his job, when he was struggling to support his family. Shocked by Rajan’s deadly mission of making India a Hindu dictatorship, Vijay warns him that this would unleash endless war. But Rajan calls Vijay an ‘English speaking pseudo-secularist’. Rajan’s supporters are prepared to continue the religious battle indefinitely. This politics of personal vendetta, of anti-Muslim and anti-Christian rhetoric was the hallmark of right-wing parties that came to power in the late 1990s. Devoted secularists were unevenly matched against fanatic mobs with time and resources who exploited the fury of the dispossessed.

On the other hand, Davidar criticises the pathetic ignorance and unpardonable inaction of the elite which helps the unhindered rise of fundamentalism. In Meham, retired army officers, scientists and businessmen, addicted to colonial lifestyles, cocooned in clubs, devote all their energies to winning flower-shows. They are happily oblivious to the rage simmering in the debt-ridden, landless peasants, in the unemployed who have no avenues left after the collapse of the tea business. The blinkered vision of the administrative machinery is also decried. Vijay who knows the workings of sectarian politics is so frustrated that he briefly contemplates eliminating Rajan. While Meham’s elite, instead of trying to prevent violence, think of calling out the army if needed, Vijay muses,

“....I could see myself interviewing the survivors and victims of communal violence, people who had been leading normal, boring lives, until, in an instant, things had swung out of control. I had interviewed the murderers too, and besides a few obvious goondas, the majority of them were ordinary men, fathers, sons, husbands, who were perfectly good neighbours and citizens until some politician or ambitious priest invoked the name of God.” (p. 195).
Meham finally becomes a mini replica of Ayodhya. Trusting the unscrupulous politician Rajan, the administration claims to be prepared. However, no action is taken when members of his rally resorts to violence. The police machinery bribed by Rajan, pretends to arrest him. The role of civil society is underlined in the relentless efforts of Vijay and his supporters, and their moulding of Noah into a weapon against communal politics. It is the rejected subaltern Noah who finally saves the situation. The press is satirized. Noah’s greatness remains unknown and very few newspapers report the events in Meham. Those that do, mourn the demise of Rajan, describing him as one of the most dynamic, young leaders of the region.

Post-colonial issues also find place in *The Solitude of Emperors*. Albeit indirectly, the novel suggests that seeds of communalism were sown by colonisers. The history of Meham’s shrine, wherein the British collector had complicated the religious dispute by appeasing all communities, proves this. More significantly, Rustom Sorabjee’s textbook on secularism negates the colonial view of Indian history as one filled with religious conflicts. It asserts how religious tolerance is encoded in the everyday life of all faiths in India, by demonstrating how Ashoka based his tolerance on Buddhism, Akbar on Islam and Gandhiji on Hinduism.

4.3.5. The Artistic Perspective –

*The Solitude of Emperors* has a simple, well-knit plot. Davidar portrays with equal finesse the vast canvas of national events and the inner life of individuals. The conflict between good and evil, secularism and communalism is resolved in a most unexpected fashion, by a least expected hero - Noah. The characterisation shows a sense of human complexity, transcending easy compartmentalisations of people (Singh 8). The characters of Noah, Mr. Sorabjee and Rajan are etched painstakingly. Noah is an enigmatic figure, striking in both life and death. The protagonist Vijay is endearing, though at times, he becomes the author’s mouthpiece. The lucid first-person narration evokes a poetic feel. The functional journalistic prose and brisk colloquial narrative achieves eloquence in descriptions of natural scenery. Davidar creates lasting impressions of the sights, sounds and smells of India.

In the part set in the great city of Bombay, Davidar narrates nineties India with its socio-political contradictions, old world charm, tryst with globalization, its changing ethos. He sketches a realistic picture of Bombay where freedom, opportunity and challenge blend into a pulsating rhythm and each one must make his own destiny. Davidar brings together the most
disparate Indians in the fight against communalism – Vijay a young, traditional Tamil Brahmin and Sorabjee an old, Westernized Parsi, showcasing the diversity of India -

“....the core of the battle we’re fighting is this: the fundamentalists have always sought to pare people down to...their religious identity, and...exclude everything else.... each of us contains worlds within us; we are so multi-faceted that we will not be put into little boxes, segregated and turned against one another.” (p. 26, 27)

The thought-provoking account of the riots profiles the psychopathology of communalists. The pathos is all-encompassing. The narration climaxes on the night when Vijay roams the riot-hit streets. The thrill soon turns to horror as he stumbles on a mutilated corpse and witnesses rioters acting with diabolic nonchalance and impersonal fury, tearing out the innards of one man and beheading another. Vijay is attacked and humiliated. When he is assaulted by a poor man of his own community, he realises that the real motivation for violence is not religion but the humiliation suffered by the poor. Nevertheless, the steadfastness, selflessness and courage of anti-communalists remain a beacon of hope.

The terse narrative finds a spirit of liberation in Meham. Davidar transports readers to the pristine beauty of the Nilgiris, Ooty and Coonoor. He is at his eloquent best in Sorabjee’s manuscript on secularism, making Indian history appealing to young minds. The entry of Noah, more ethereal than human, opens up a world of fantasy. Named Noah after the righteous Biblical figure whose ark saves creation from extinction, he lives like Lord Shiva the destroyer, in a burial ground, isolating himself. He stands for the death of the old order and the birth of a new one. Cynical about religion and tradition, he values truth, beauty, love and liberty. Though a perpetual drifter, his end makes him far superior to those with jobs and missions. His character goes beyond religion to true spirituality.

Throughout the novel is the interplay of human passions with national destiny. Whenever Vijay is tempted to stay away from the dangerous situation in Meham, the passionate memory of the 1992 riots spurs him on. Rajan’s radicalism is rooted in passions stoked by injustice. Again, a passionate war of words leads Noah to do the unthinkable. A sense of fate pervades the entire novel. The foreboding is strong on the last evenings when Noah and Vijay discuss death. Destiny leads Vijay to the conflict he both wants to escape and is obsessed with. He cannot forgive himself for inspiring Noah to become a martyr. He cannot reconcile
himself to the fact that God should allow the good to be sacrificed in order to annihilate the evil. He begins to abhor the very idea of religion -

“It is a story that stretches back centuries...of sultans, soldiers, saints and ordinary men who felt the dead weight of God in their bones, urging them on to acts of folly.... .... under the gaze of an indifferent God, heedless to the passion and tragedy of the men who sacrificed themselves in his name. Noah and Rajan were only the latest victims but there would be...many more, who would perish.....at many other places of worship in this land corroded by religion.” (p.232, 233)

The novel ends with a beautiful tribute to Noah’s sad life, to humanity, meditating on the purpose of life and the immortal soul that flies through eternity negotiating life and death –

“...while most of us, after a period of youthful rebellion....devote ourselves to burrowing into society, building safety nets, surrounding ourselves with barricades like family and possessions against the unsettling nature of life, mavericks such as Noah retain the lightness of unburdened youth...that enables them to soar up ... and perform feats that we would find impossible. Our role...was to provide the springboard, usually unbeknown to ourselves. .....it is only when people close to us die that we begin to learn how to live ... the one who has passed on fuses with us, and we become a different person altogether. It is a condition of life that our beloved dead will never be forgotten.” (p. 244)

4.3.6. Critical Review –

_The Solitude of Emperors_ pits the dehumanising communal politics of the nineties against the modern educated youth of India. On the one hand, if unemployed and frustrated youth are recruited by fundamentalist organisations, there are also enlightened youth like Vijay who oppose divisive forces. David Davidar reiterates the need to educate the young against intolerant forces which seek to destroy the pluralistic heritage of India for vested interests. Vijay's secular education begins at home. His parents are teachers who seek to transcend the unjust divisions of caste and religion. His father's social consciousness inspires him to choose journalism as his profession. Vijay is shaped into a fine journalist by the wonderful atmosphere at the Indian Secularist. His editor Rustom Sorabjee educates him about the role of secularism in Indian democracy and the dangers of mixing religion and politics. Vijay and his fellow-journalists play a sterling role in bringing solace to riot-hit Bombay. They fight a lonely battle against mighty communal forces. All this suggests the need to recognize the role of youth in nation-building. This theme finds its fullest expression in the ending. Inspired by Vijay's earnest efforts, young Noah sacrifices himself for the cause of peace and harmony.
The idea of moulding the young into ideal citizens is highlighted in Sorabjee’s book. Secularism is placed firmly within the Indian tradition through this book within the novel. It emphasizes the need to educate youngsters about national issues since young minds can become easy prey for fundamentalists or can be moulded into mighty positive forces. About these didactic essays in the novel Davidar says, “It was a deliberate decision to do it that way. Sorabjee makes it clear to Vijay that he is writing the essays for a teenage audience, making it as simple as possible for them to understand and be inspired by the lives of ... great men” (Singh 8). Davidar’s fascinating thesis which brings together Ashoka, Akbar and Gandhi, explains his approach to the national situation in the 1990s, to the roles of state and citizen, and to secularism and communalism in Indian polity. He presents the ideal ruler India badly needs by portraying three great paragons - Ashoka, Akbar and Gandhi.

Sorabjee's textbook has been deeply influenced by the ideas in Amartya Sen's landmark works - *The Argumentative Indian* and *Identity and Violence*. Sen argues that democracy and secularism are not gifts of the West to India. India’s ancient tradition of argumentation and heterodoxy contradicts the narrow Hindutva view of Indian civilization. A true study of Indian history shows that the inherently multicultural and multi-religious essence of India has extended since Vedic times and found support in modern leaders like Gandhi and Tagore. India’s secular, socialist democracy is rooted in dialogue, public reasoning and critique. Orientalists project a false view of Indian culture as unreasoning. To quote Amartya Sen, “It was indeed a Buddhist emperor of India, Ashoka, who, in the third century BCE, not only outlined the need for toleration and the richness of heterodoxy, but also laid down...the oldest rules for conducting debates and disputation, with the opponents being ‘duly honoured in every way on all occasions’. .....the most powerful defence of toleration and of the need for the state to be equidistant from different religions came from a Muslim Indian emperor, Akbar..... in the 1590s ... when the Inquisition was in full swing in Europe (Sen, *The Argumentative Indian* xii-xiii).

Thus, Davidar's manuscript, by presenting Indian history as inherently plural and all-inclusive challenges colonial ideas about the clash of religions and cultures in India. According to eminent historian Romila Thapar, orientalist scholars popularised the concept of conflicting Hindu and Muslim civilizations, thus generating harmful religious nationalisms. This religious concept of nation was taken up in the twentieth century. While Muslim fundamentalists demanded the separate Islamic nation of Pakistan, Hindu radicals tried to
demarcate India as a Hindu nation victimized by non-Hindus. To quote Romila Thapar, “India’s society has always been multi-religious, multicultural society where identities have inevitably been multiple...Our history in India has been very different from that projected in the two-nation theory and the Hindutva ideology. If we can read our history with more sensitivity and insight it would contribute to avoiding a fascist future” (Thapar 1-31).

As far as the depiction of the religious conflagration in Bombay is concerned, Davidar is realistic. He captures the human angle of divisive national politics. The fear, selfishness, endurance and resilience of the commoners are brought out. The emotional scars of the violence are indelible. While most people have no option but to continue living as before, there are a few noble souls who risk fighting anti-social elements and bring succour to victims. The second part of the novel set in Meham is significant for two reasons - one, it depicts the spread of northern communal politics into southern India; secondly, it presents social injustice as the source of religious fanaticism. According to Davidar, underdevelopment and the great chasm between haves and have-nots caused by the failure of the state machinery and exploited by political agents gives rise to communalism. Rajan, the local leader, epitomises the suave new-age politician who hides his selfish divisive agenda behind the mask of benevolence. The debate between Vijay and Rajan represents the national debate between secularists who advocate a plural identity for India and Hindutva ideologues who see India as a Hindu civilization and minorities as enemies. The Hindu-Christian conflict mirrors the violent anti-conversion campaign unleashed by radical Hindu groups against the Christian community in several parts of India. Regarding the depiction of inter-religious tensions in Meham, G.J.V. Prasad writes, “David Davidar does get the politics of hill station India right ... he knows a lot of what he is talking about”( Prasad 9).

In both parts of *The Solitude of Emperors* set in Bombay and in Meham, David Davidar strongly condemns civil society when it fails to oppose communal politics. Eternal vigilance is the constant refrain in the novel. Right from the time Vijay begins his journalistic journey in his small town to the time he learns the ropes of the trade in the cauldron of riot-hit Bombay and finally when Vijay crosses his limits as a journalist to become a crusader against extremist forces in Meham, Davidar expresses strong views about ethical journalism and the national role of the media. While he castigates commercialised mainstream media for succumbing to sensationalism without principles or vision, he lauds alternative media like the *Indian Secularist* which continue a selfless campaign to preserve peace and unity. According
to senior journalist Siddharth Varadarajan, the Indian press has internalized the communal logic to such an extent that most of its news reporting and analysis suffers from an undercurrent of sectarian bias. Its vocabulary is replete with communal clichés and stereotypes. Those elements in the media who are committed to secularism and expose how riots are engineered, function under severe threat and are neither supported nor protected by the government (Varadarajan 160-229). Davidar also condemns the uncondonable ignorance, apathy and selfish inaction of the educated middle class, the elite, the police and bureaucracy which give a free hand to fundamentalist politicians and their mercenaries. The precarious situation in Meham when Rajan plans to turn a Christian shrine into a Hindu temple, almost becomes a replica of the demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya. In both instances, the administration acts in an eerily similar manner - lethargic, irresponsible, and partial to powerful politicians. Ironically, the Justice Liberhan Commission took seventeen years to report on the 1992 Babri demolition and today the guilty are yet to be brought to justice.

Finally, David Davidar convinces the reader with his arguments in favour of a multi-religious and multi-cultural India, where tolerance, peaceful debate, respect for all, openness to diversity, understanding and harmony flourish. He asserts that communal violence engineered by calculating politicians and holy men is ‘the’ greatest danger to free India and is to be fought with truth and non-violence. While explaining the idea of the secular state in the Indian Constitution, he distinguishes between the Indian and Western notions of secularism—

"The Western interpretation of secularism is the strict separation of Church and State, but that would never have worked in this country, where religion permeates every aspect of daily life, our founding fathers took it to mean an even-handedness or neutrality towards all faiths." (p.27)

In India, secularism evolved from the struggle of nationalist forces against communal forces, unlike the West where it was the outcome of the struggle between Church and State. According to Pandit Nehru, “It does not obviously mean a society where religion itself is discouraged.....It means free play for all religions, subject only to their not interfering with each other or with the basic conceptions of our State.” Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan regarded this definition of secularism to be in accordance with the ancient religious tradition of India (qtd. in Chandra 60). Jai Arjun Singh observes, “At a time when intellectuals are becoming increasingly cynical...about religion, Davidar has the gumption to argue that discarding religion altogether can never be a practical...solution for a country like India...the Indian
interpretation of secularism has to remain different from that in the West” (Singh 8). In the final analysis, Davidar holds that no religion is greater than humanity.

4.3.7. Summing Up: A Roadmap for the Nation –

The Solitude of Emperors is a perceptive book about modern India and has clear directions and ideals at its core. It challenges Indians to confront themselves in solitude, recognize the dangers of narrow-minded nationalism and fundamentalist beliefs, and become actively involved in preserving the harmony of a divided nation. For Davidar, the three greatest Indians are Ashoka, Akbar and Gandhi because they possessed a soaring vision for India that transcended caste and creed. Even the epigraph of the novel taken from the Indian saint-poet Kabir underlines this spirit of liberation and all-embracing inclusiveness –

“The one who stays within the limits assigned to him is a man
The one who roams beyond these limits is a saint.

To reject both limits and their absence:
that’s a thought with immeasurable depths.

-Kabir ”

4.4. Conclusion: Resolving the Nineties Dilemma –

Meher Pestonji’s Pervez- A Novel and David Davidar’s The Solitude of Emperors highlight vital dimensions of personal and national destinies in the 1990s. Firstly, they chronicle the tussle between secularism and communalism. The incredible diversity of India led Winston Churchill to remark, “India is no more a single country than the equator.” According to Rabindranath Tagore, a ‘unity of spirit’ has knit India together despite immense diversities. The Indian people set out to build a plural, secular nation-state. However communal politics arose powerfully after the late eighties due to economic inequalities, loss of ethics, commercialisation, end of political idealism and lack of a unifying national vision. Though the good sense of the Indian people has asserted itself over communal passions, conflict and persecution in the name of religion continues. As Romila Thapar opines, “The history of the twentieth century in the subcontinent will be remembered.....for the rise of communal ideologies into a position of prominence in national politics” (Thapar 1).

Secondly, since both Pestonji and Davidar have a journalistic background, their accounts of the 1992-93 Bombay riots have striking resemblances. Their multi-dimensional narratives
correspond to the official report of the Justice B.N. Srikrishna Committee on communal violence in Bombay, submitted in 1998. Thirdly, they portray communal violence as more of an urban phenomenon. In the nineties, economic liberalization and globalization had created a new upper class. However, lopsided development led to migration from villages to cities and expansion of slums. The frustration of the have-nots and jobless youth made them easy recruits for power-hungry politicians and criminal gangs who incited communal violence. Ironically, religious and ethnic riots became one of the most secularized areas wherein money, politics and organized interests played a more important part than religious passions.

Fourthly, the role of the state is critiqued. The novels are suggestive of how ‘fragile’ the concept of nation is and how the seeds of communal hatred sown by British colonisers flourish at the hands of the ruling elite today. They condemn the laxity of government apparatuses in countering communal violence, especially the overt or covert communal tendencies of the police and bureaucracy. They expose the political opportunism which has made communal parties an integral part of electoral politics. Though Indian polity and society still remain basically secular, the intrusion of religion into state affairs and vice-versa is undesirable. Fifthly, the role of the citizen is analysed. Through Pervez in Pervez-A Novel and Noah in The Solitude of Emperors, the subaltern finally speaks. The subalterns experience inner transformation as they come to the national centrestage. When governance fails, they redeem the nation. In Pestonji’s novel, Pervez, a housewife from a minority community, encouraged by her friends, becomes an activist against communal politics. In Davidar’s novel, the protagonist Vijay inspires Noah the penniless vagabond and social outcaste to become a heroic figure by sacrificing his life to preserve peace. At the same time, both Pestonji and Davidar criticise civil society which fails to act decisively against radical elements.

Above all, Pervez- A Novel and The Solitude of Emperors include themes of universal significance. They suggest that India has to lead the world by an exemplary model of pluralism. India can never be co-terminus with one religion or culture. Both Tagore and Gandhi opposed the viewing of the nation and humanity at large through the narrow prism of religions or ethnicities. Unless the world recognizes the constantly overlapping pluralities of human identity, there is bound to be disarray and terror.
Works Cited –


Chapter V – Understanding Contemporary India: The Wider Canvas Post-2000

(Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*, Vikas Swarup’s *Q&A* and *Six Suspects*, and Tarun Tejpal’s *The Story Of My Assassins*)

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