Chapter 5

Bal-raje Abhayraj of Begwad

Manohar Malgonkar’s *The Princes* is a period novel. It presents a representative picture of the predicament of Indian monarchs and their households in the decades leading up to Indian Independence and the merger of loyal India with British India to form Independent India.

One of the concerns of the novel is the upbringing of the children of royal households in the context of the changing times. *The Princes* does not seek to represent all the ways in which royal children were brought up, because there is only one prince in the story. However, it does attempt to present the general influence of the times on the psyche of royal children in determining their response to the cataclysmic changes overtaking the Indian subcontinent politic and the Indian people.

A day or two after his eleventh or twelfth birthday, *Bal-raje* (Maharajkumar / Yuvaraj / Crown Prince) Abhayraj of Begwad sees a beautiful ram being carried by a servant to the royal kitchen and makes it his pet. Naming it Cannonball, he trains it as a butting ram. A year later, he innocently enters it in the ram fight for the Dassara festival. When his Cannonball begins to take a beating, Abhay wants to withdraw it from the contest, but, his father, Bcdar (Maharaja) Hiroji of Begwad, forbids it.
The fight continues until Cannonball collapses and dies, watched tearfully by Abhay (Malgonkar, *The Princes* 24-28).

In the evening, while worshipping the family deity Ambica as part of the Dassara festival, the Maharaja goes into a trance. Later he tells Abhay that he has been praying to Ambica to give Abhay strength to reconquer all their possessions and re-establish the raj of the Bedars of Begwad between the Kali and the Nashi rivers, and beyond, up to Delhi itself. Then he lectures Abhay on manliness: men who weep cannot call themselves men and should wear baneles and hide their faces: the Bedars are fearless, since *Beciar* means without fear; they are like lions and do not weep for dead lambs; they never break down in public; they have to take a whipping now and then and must learn to take it without flinching, without showing that they are hurt; they should behave like well-bred dogs, which do not set up a howl when kicked, like a pie dog; it is most important not to squeal; and, tears are the refuge of the weak (Malgonkar, *The Princes* 30-31).

The Maharaja proceeds to extract a solemn promise from Abhay that he will never break down in public. Abhay promises. Then the Maharaja forces Abhay to drink a glass of whisky, Abhay obliges. Only when he nears the dining table does Abhay realise that the main dish of the evening is a whole roast sheep—his own Cannonball. Invoking Arab
hospitality for the evening, the Maharaja names himself the host and the Yuvaraj the chief guest and, carving out the eyes of Cannonball, offers them on a plate to Abhay. Observing Abhay’s difficulty in swallowing the eye, the Maharaja helps him with another shot of neat brandy and gladly watches the eye go down Abhay’s throat. Then, Abhay, throwing away his fork, grabs the other eye with his fingers and thrusts it into his mouth, declining the Maharaja’s offer of another glass of whisky. The Maharaja congratulates him. Abhay relishes his triumph. But he also hates his father sufficiently to be ready to kill him then (Malgonkar, The Princes 31-33).

Abhay’s childhood was circumscribed by the boundary walls of the Hirabagh palace; he was brought up by a bunch of fat and clammy ayahs and an angular and icy nanny; and, at eight years, he was glad when they were replaced by male attendants and tutors (Malgonkar, The Princes 34-35).

Since the age of eight, he seems to be always doing some kind of lesson or other: riding lessons, cricket lessons, boxing lessons, music lessons and sword fighting lessons, according to a rigid time-table laid down by his father (Malgonkar, The Princes 35).

Abhay sees very little of his parents. Usually he sees his mother at breakfast, always looking peaked and tired. He sees her again just before
going to bed; looking radiant and beautiful, and gorgeously dressed (Malgonkar, *The Princes* 35).

Abhay also sees his father in the evenings. Bathed and dressed in pyjamas, he is taken by the nanny to the billiards room. Generally his father appears happy to see him. Occasionally, however, his mind seems far away and his greeting is functionary (Malgonkar, *The Princes* 35-36).

Abhay hardly ever sees his parents together. Lessons occupy most of his days and he relishes the achievements he posts. His favourite sport is riding, under the coaching of Hamidulla. He can still recall the figure of Hamidulla and his orders: “Fikra-fight! Fikra-fight!”; his way of saying “Figure of eight” (Malgonkar, *The Princes* 36-37).

One of Abhay’s boyhood friends is Charudutt, his father’s son by a concubine known as Bibi-bai. A loud mouthed bully older than Abhay by one year, Charudutt is feared by all the boys at school. Charudutt and Abhay are always involved in scraps. When his father sees braises on Abhay’s body, he arranges boxing lessons for him. Within two months, Abhay puts an end to Charadhult’s attacks. It is only years later that Abhay understands that Charudutt’s hatred for him is due to the fact that he can never be the Yuvaraj, since he is the son of a concubine. Charudutl’s mother has an extraordinary hold over the Maharaja, though she is not his only concubine (Malgonkar, *The Princes* 37-38).
Abhay learns Hindi, Sanskrit and the scriptures from Pandit Sharma and spends the evenings with his English tutor Frederick Moreton. In addition to English, history and geography, Moreton teaches him English customs and manners. Most evenings, they go for a ride in one of the palace cars and often sit and listen to western music. Moreton even attempts to teach Abhay to play the piano, but fails (Malgonkar, *The Princes* 38).

Of Moreton’s influence on the formation of his personality and character. Abhay says:

> I now feel he may have been the greatest single influence of my early days. He was perhaps the only man in the palace who treated me as an equal, not as a child, but as an adult, and, for much of the time, not as a prince either, but an ordinary man. He was always interested in what I had to say, and above all he never betrayed my confidence. Even though he represented authority, I found myself regarding him more and more as a guide and mentor, even as a companion. . . . (Malgonkar, *The Princes* 38-39).

Abhay makes friends with a cobbler’s son named Kanakchand in his class in the Ashokraj High School. Since he is an untouchable, he is made to sit on the floor, at the back of the class, away from the others.
One day, while they are playing mango-seed football during the morning break, the children who sit at the back of the class are watching their play from a respectful distance. In their enthusiasm, some of these boys join the game and one of them tackles Charudutt to the ground. An enraged Charudutt abuses them as cow-eaters and shoos them away. The others join in baiting the untouchables. The untouchables flee, one of them leaving behind his satchel leaning against a pillar. Charudutt grabs it and proposes to throw it into the pond. The other boys agree that it will teach the cow-eaters a lesson not to come and muck up their game. The owner of the satchel begs that his books be returned and he be forgiven. But Charudutt dumps his satchel into the pond. The untouchable boy begins to pommel Charudutt. But Charudutt, who is bigger, gets the better of him. Then he proposes dumping the boy also in the pond. Some of the boys do so and Charudutt abuses him repeatedly. The untouchable boy retorts by calling Charudutt a bastard, a whore’s son. As Charudutt flares, the bell rings and they all run into the classrooms. After school, as they are going home, Abhay notices that the untouchable boy is standing near the pond shivering, with his books spread out to dry. Later he learns that the boy’s name is Kanakchand (Malgonkar, *The Princes* 39–40).

That evening, Abhay asks Pandit Sharma the meaning of the word “bastard”. The Pandit is shocked and, warning Abhay not to utter the
word, changes the subject, Abhay says that he will ask Moreton. Pandit Sharma says that the English tutor will be shocked. Later Abhay puts the same question to Moreton. The English tutor is taken aback, but, after stating that it is not a word used by respectable people, he goes on to explain it as mildly as he can. He also protests against the dumping of the books in the pond, because the boy’s father may not be able to buy him another set. When Abhay bluntly asks if Charudutt is not a bastard, a whore's son, Moreton skilfully advises him on how a gentleman should speak. Abhay, however, cannot forget the fact that there are so many uparajas in the family who are given pensions and treated as noblemen (Malgonkar, *The Princes* 40-43).

The next morning Kanakchand is sent out of the class for not having his books with him. He hangs around the school the whole day with a vacant book. The next morning, Kanakchand sits outside the class. Charudutt is absent, feigning a stomach-ache in order to listen to the commentary on a cricket match in Bombay. During the break, Abhay speaks to Kanakchand. He learns that the boy’s father will beat him if he finds out that the books are gone and that they cannot afford to buy even second-hand books. Abhay offers to give the boy money the next day. But since he has no money, the next day he give Kanakshand his own
books and is happy to see the boy in class again (Malgonkar, *The Princes* 43-44),

That evening Moreton discovers that Abhay’s books are missing, along with his copy of *Highroads Treasury*, a book of English poems given to Abhay by him for his previous birthday. Abhay has to explain what happened to his books and he adds that he gave his books to Kanakchand because he had no money to give. Moreton seems quite pleased with what Abhay did. He even appreciates the act. He adds that he will speak to the Maharaja about giving him a pocket allowance. The next morning Abhay finds a set of new books on his table. At school, Kanakchand returns to him the *Highroads Treasury* (Malgonkar, *The Princes* 44-46).

Abhay and Kanakchand become friends, helping each other with their lessons. Kanakchand is good at all subjects except English, while Abhay is far ahead of the class in English. One day Kanakchand brings Abhay a gift, some large polished bean-seeds. Abhay gives Kanakchand two marbles. Abhay keeps giving Kanakchand small gifts (Malgonkar, *The Princes* 47).

Kanakchand is Abhay’s first contact with the poverty of India, as Abhay explains:
One day when he showed me what he had brought with him for his mid-day meal—a single black roti smeared with a mess of oil and chillis and a whole raw onion—for no reason at all I felt close to tears.

It seemed that even the onion was something of a treat, and that bajra or millet bread and chilli powder mixed with ground-nut oil formed his main meal of the day. I watched with fascination as he ate, hungrily and with relish, and felt a little ashamed of the extra-large chocolate which I had just bitten into and which seemed to taste slightly bitter in my mouth. He wolfed the very last crumb, biting alternatively on the charred bajra roti and the onion. And when he finished the very last mouthful, he liked his fingers clean before going to the tap to wash his hands (Malgonkar, The Princes 47-48).

Abhay has another chocolate in his pocket. He had found them on his table as he was leaving for school. He takes it out and gives it to Kanakchand to eat, Kanakchand thanks him and stuffs the chocolate into his mouth, wrapper and all. As Abhay tells him that he should not eat the wrapping, Kanakchand realizes his mistake and spits it out. He apologises
and says that he has never seen anything like it in his life (Malgonkar, *The Princes* 48).

That evening, Abhay falls ill and is bed-ridden for days. Whenever he wakes up he sees his mother beside his bed. Often he thinks he is aware of the presence of a broad, unrefined face with a thin moustache and smelling of cigar smoke and cheap liquor. He has dreams too. In one of them he sees his mother naked in bed with a hairy man and he can smell the scent of tobacco smoke and rum (Malgonkar, *Princes* 48-50).

When Abkay recovers, his Father introduces to him to Abdulla Jan, the new Palace Officer, who has replaced old Kabraji. Abhay is shocked because it is Abdulla’s face that has haunted him all these days during his illness. Abhay takes an instant dislike to the man. His father has brought Abdulla from police service in British India as a bodyguard for Abhay. He has also replaced all the servants, including Dhaniram, Abhay’s personal servant of years (Malgonkar, *The Princes* 50-51).

A week later, Abhay learns that a school boy has been coming to see him every day. It is Kanakchand. Abhay and Kanakchand become closer than before. Abhay invites Kanakchand to his annual party for the children of the palace staff, much against the objections of Charudutt, in fact he even tells his half-brother that he need not come to the party if he does not like to. When Charudutt threatens to tell his mother and through...
her the Maharaja, Abhay bluntly points out that the Maharaja no longer visits his mother (Malgonkar, *The Princes* 51-52).

Two years later, Abhay learns that Charudutt’s mother came to be suspected of having tried to poison the Yuvaraj:

> It seems that the doctors had told my father that my illness had been due to some kind of food poisoning, and when he had found out about the two chocolates which had been so temptingly put beside my school books, he had jumped to the conclusion that someone had tried to poison me.

> No one had been able to discover how the chocolates had come to be where they were. It was believed that one of the palace servants had been bribed to put them there. That was why my father had dismissed all the servants in my wing and brought in Abdulla Jan, who was experienced in security duties, as the Palace Officer.

> The coincidence between my illness and my father’s sudden abandonment of Bibi-bai was so marked, that everyone seemed to take it for granted that my father was convinced that Bibi-bai had tried to murder me in an effort to secure the succession for her own son; it was not unknown for a prince to adopt a son born of a concubine if
there was no direct heir to the gadi. Personally I never paid much heed to that kind of talk. At the same time, it was quite true that hardly any Indian state was free of such rumours, for poisonings were almost the recognized weapons of succession disputes, a sort of occupational hazard for growing princes.

The fact remains that within a month of my illness, my father had Bibi-bai’s residence shifted from the old palace to a tumble-down house near the elephant gate. (Malgonkar, The Princes 52)

The Gandhian movement seeps into Begwad, but the Maharaja stamps it out firmly, as Abhay narrates:

My father had banned all the nationalist papers such as the Chronicle of Bombay and the Hindustan Times of Delhi, and had promulgated ordinances in the state to keep in step with the Viceroy’s ordinances legalizing preventive detention, and indeed had kept well ahead of the British parts of India in the race for repressive legislation. He bustled about energetically, trying to make “examples” of people associated with the agitation. He dismissed a clerk in his octroi department because he had seen the man’s son
wearing the white **khaddar** cap. And once he was so enraged by a group of people shouting “**Inquilab-zindabad**”, which meant “long live the revolution”, after his car had passed, that he had all of them rounded up and sent to prison for three weeks.

He went on tightening his “security measures” as he called them, matching his wits against the enemy. He passed orders that any boy found wearing the white cap was to be instantly removed from school. He stopped the sale of photographs of Tilak and Gandhi in the state. He also reintroduced horse-whipping as a punishment for these and similar crimes, and the next time someone **shouted a nationalist** slogan in his hearing, he had the offender flogged in the market square.

And right enough, the political movement seemed to disappear from our state. At least people did not go about shouting slogans any longer, or wearing the white cap in defiance of the ordinances, and Father took that as evidence of a complete victory. He was convinced that it was his stringent measures for security, his “exemplary” punishments, **that had eradicated Mr.Gandhi’s** movement from his state. (Malgonkar, *The Princes* 61-62)
At the same time, Abhay cannot forget the close attachment between his father and his people and he recalls what the subjects of Begwad say about the Maharaja:

“He would come to us on horseback, like a king should”, they say of my father, “Riding through our fields, talking our own language”.

“And whenever he was amongst us, he would always share our food—whatever we were eating. Because a king should know what his people eat, how they live”. ...

“In the days of Hiroji Maharaj”, they will tell you in recalling the days of my father’s rule, “we used to get wheat at sixteen seers to the rupee”.

“He was a real food-giver, the anna-data, was our Dada-Maharaj”.

“Yes, and jowar was twenty seers to the rupee. A man could live on five rupees a month and still have money for tobacco....”

“Tobacco! It has become like gold and silver... and they sell you wood husk”.

“And whenever anyone wanted to see the Maharaj, all they
had to do was to go to the evening audience ... or in an emergency, hold up the car when he was driving past. Now you cannot even see a Tahsildar for three days . . . and then you have to pay a rupee to his chaprasi”,

“At my daughter’s wedding, I had the state military band given free ... just as at the wedding of the prince himself”,

“The band as well as the utensils were always given free—the taats and the waties for the wedding feast. You could feed a hundred. ...”

"Nowadays it costs at least a hundred rupees to hire the cooking and serving utensils”,

“But who can think of feeding a hundred people these days!” (Malgonkar, *The Princes* 62-64)

Kanakchand tells Abhay quite a lot about the Gandhian anti-salt-tax campaign. He wishes that he were old enough to join the nationalists and wear the white cap, the people’s cap. He reveals that he does wear one in his bustee, because otherwise he will be stoned by the boys (Malgonkar, *The Princes* 65-66).

The Maharaja awards five annual scholarships to boys selected from the Ashok Raj High School (which has only five classes) to study three years at the High School at: Jubblepore. The scholarships are given
for proficiency in English, decided on the merits of an essay written by the candidates. Kanakchand asks Abhay to help him with his essay. Quite convinced of the righteousness of his action, Abhay writes the essay for Kanakchand and Kanakchand wins the scholarship (Malgonkar, *The Princes* 67-68).

At the award ceremony, the Maharaja accuses Kanakchand of cheating and mentions that his essay was written by another; he accuses him of disloyalty and pulls a white cap out of his pocket. Then he whips Kanakchand and orders the cringing and crying boy to be taken away (Malgonkar, *The Princes* 70-71).

That night Abhay cries in bed. His mother is unable to console him. She promises to do something about it. He declares that he hates his father. He fears that Kanakchand will accuse him of telling his father (Malgonkar, *The Princes* 71-72). Abhay’s mother keeps her word:

About a week later, my mother told me that it had all been sorted out. She had arranged it through Abdulla Jan. She had sent word to Roopchand, Kanakchand’s father, that she would not only bear all the expenses of his son’s high school education, but would pay for his going to college as well. From that day my mother paid the money demanded by Roopchand every month for the next nine years, until
Kanakchand passed out of the law college (Malgonkar, *The Princes* 72)

Abhay goes to the Chelmsford Princes’ College at Agra. Before his departure, his teachers give him advice. His father gives him a Holland shotgun. His mother gives him an expensive pocket watch. Abhay likes the gun best. But, since he is not allowed to take a gun to the Princes’ College, he leaves it behind in his room in the palace. It is just a finishing school for the sons of the princes, where the emphasis is not on examinations, but on sports (Malgonkar, *The Princes* 74-75).

Returning home for the holidays, Abhay rushes to his Holland shotgun. To his horror, he discovers that it has been used. Establishing that Abdulla Jan has used it, Abhay gives him a terrible tongue-lashing, asserting his authority as Yuvaraj (Malgonkar, *The Princes* 79-81).

In the evening, he goes to meet his mother. She has heard of the clash and advises him to control his temper and his language. She asks him to apologise to Abdulla, keep the incident from his father and not think of punishing Abdulla. Abhay is disturbed at her attitude to the incident and to Abdulla. She is particular that Abdulla should not go away (Malgonkar, *The Princes* 81-83).

Abhay finds himself alone. Charudutt has been prohibited from entering the palace. When he sends word to Kanakchand, he is told that
his friend has not come home for the holidays. However, riding out later, he sees Charudutt and Kanakchand chatting happily. They move away at Ms approach. Pressed, Kanakchand bluntly says that he does not wish to talk to Abhay and that he hates him. It is clear that Kanakchand has succumbed to revolutionary ideas (Malgonkar, *Princes* 86-88).

Abhay observes that Ms mother is very unhappy:

> And I also became aware of the unhappiness that haunted my mother. I played rummy with her in the afternoons, and accompanied her for her evening drives. It was sad to see what joy these small attentions gave her. My loneliness was nothing to hers; mine was wholly transitory, hers was permanent. Her life was a great emptiness and there was nothing anyone could do about it. One could not do more than feel sorry for her, and play an occasional game of rummy with her, this woman who, although she was a Maharani, was also branded as having the white foot [ill-luck]. Cast away by her husband in the first bloom of youth, now grown to maturity with all the fires of her being unslaked, she was if anything looking lovelier than ever, and, almost perversely, more radiant and lively than ever.
too, full of laughter and happiness. (Malgonkar, *Princes* 97-98)

After his education at the Princes’ College, Abhay comes home to find Abdulla gone and he is happy. Abhay goes to a regular college and earns a degree. Next he has to undergo administrative training in some royal establishment. Travancore and Sir C.P. Ramanswami Aiyer are being mentioned. Yuvaraj Abhayraj is on the threshold of adulthood (Malgonkar, *Princes* 102-118).

Given the kind of upbringing that Abhay has received and his childhood experiences, his future conduct may be foretold more or less accurately. Abhay’s estrangement from his father, his enlisting in the British Indian Army, his brave experiences during the Burma campaign follow logically from his upbringing. Again it is his upbringing that accounts for the manner in which he deals with the revolutionary Kanakchand who dares to beard him on his own home turf merely because he is a big nationalist figure in a new country. But Abhay’s innate class and his upbringing assert themselves and he prefers honour to a compromise with opportunists. He publicly horsewhips Kanakchand and, rather than face an inquiry, abdicates his royal privileges.