Chapter - 2

Distant Drum

An Epitaph for the British Indian Army
Manohar Malgonkar’s first novel *Distant Drum* (1960) is an exposition of a story of success – a narration of the process of self realization of the central figure and hero Kiran Garud. It is a human story of struggle and success and final achievement of a goal. Malgonkar himself says in his preface to the novel that it is largely the story of the success or failure of the efforts of one of the officers of the Regiment to live up to its code (1).

*Distant Drum* is read not so much as the story of an Indian officer’s growth and maturity but as an epitaph for the British Indian Army. As a matter of fact, it is the historical aspect of *Distant Drum* which has appealed to its readers, rather than its fictional content.

Malgonkar explains in the guise of the love story of Kiran and Bina the working of the army in detail before and after Independence and makes the drab and humdrum existence of the army entirely engrossing and absorbing, throbbing with life by creating human situations. On one level *Distant Drum* is the story of one of the officers of the Regiment to live up to its code and on another a symbolic presentation of the Indian encounter with the British in the Army and its values for India. Unlike E.M. Forster’s *Passage to India* which gives a vastly different account of the Indo-British encounter and ends up with “no not yet”, *Distant Drum* is a story of success. What accounts for this success in Malgonkar’s version of the encounter is the Indian acceptance of the mystic code which was originally moulded to suit British character and ideals commenting on *Distant Drum* Sir Arthur Bryant said:

“We may have done nothing else worth while for India in our two centuries of rule, but the conception of dedicated duty and honour that animated the British Indian Army animates today the armies of India and Pakistan” (Illustrated London News, Nov, 26, 1966).

D.R. Sharma remarks that *Distant Drum* is not epitaph for the British Indian Army nor does it assumal in unblinking Angophilia. Though the hero of the novel admires the British officers, he also questions their behavior when they go
Indian Army animates today the armies of India and Pakistan" (Illustrated London News, Nov, 26, 1966).

D.R. Sharma remarks that Distant Drum is not epitaph for the British Indian Army nor does it assumal in unblinking Anglophilia. Though the hero of the novel admires the British officers, he also questions their behavior when they go wrong (Times Literary Supplement, May 12, 1961). Distant Drum is the story of how an Indian army officer applies the principles that he inherited from the old army to the changed conditions of modern India. G.S. Amur remarks that on the larger context Distant Drum is a documentation of army life in its various aspects and a celebration of the army code as developed by the British in the Indian army (47). On the personal level it is the history of an Indian officer's initiation into the code and his success in living up to it in a variety of circumstances and relationships. It provides one more proof of the truth of Malcolm Muggeridges epigram.

A reviewer in Edinburgh Magazine remarks that Distant Drum is the characteristics of the novel buried in it which are the least satisfying and it is happier as an extended cameo of the Indian army (June 1961). Shankar's weekly dismissed Distant Drum as "un blinking Anglophilia", a desi Bhowani Junction but significantly The Times Literary Supplement remarked that the novel made the British reader feel that the need never be ashamed of the past that can still so creatively affect the Indian present (Shankar's Weekly, June 25, 1961). G.S. Amur remarks that if Nirad Choudhuri's Autobiography of an Unknown India is an epitaph for the British Raj, Manohar Malgonkar's Distant Drum is an epitaph for the British Indian Army (46). There are many themes in Distant Drum the Indo-British relationships at a personal level, the theme of loyalty and friendship, the love of Kiran and Bina and chiefly the all enveloping theme of self realization, the initiation of the hero Kiran Garud. Besides the important theme of army life and Indo-British relationships, the most relevant one is that of the initiation and the growing up of Kiran Garud the hero.

We follow the hero through his experiences, his attempts to prove himself. This notion of maturing growth that can only occur through encounter with
experience is one of the Malgonkar’s primary themes (Dayananda 44). The main theme of *Distant Drum* is the growth of the protagonist, Kiran Garud as an army officer who, throughout the novel, remains loyal to his profession as a duty-bound soldier.

*Distant Drum* tries to pursue the same goal and embody the same spirit in the fictional work which might have been Malgonkar’s wish in real life. Malgonkar does not describe the personal life and the family background of Kiran Garud. The life of Kiran Garud is portrayed his relation to the military code of conduct. Therefore, in a way we can say that *Distant Drum* is a fictional documentation of the military code, which Malgonkar holds most important in real life as well.

It is to be noted that though Malgonkar was in the army, he had not first-hand knowledge of the war, as he had not actively participated in it. He was ‘in a strategic place, the intelligence corps which gave him the chance to come into direct contact with the army officers and the soldiers who fought Burma front. In this regard Malgonkar himself states,

> The war incidents narrated in my novels or short stories are not necessarily experienced or witnessed by me. I was never in the active battle; but I read accounts of it and heard numerous incidents from some of my fellow officers who had participated in them (Malgonkar 30).

However Malgonkar makes his protagonist, Kiran Garud takes part in the action in *Distant Drum*.

Malgonkar has been able to create a very realistic picture of the Indian army in the theory of change – marked his the Second World War, the dawn of independence, the vivisection of the nation, the departure of many British officers of the Indian army, the division of the army, the quick promotion of the Indians to the higher echelons in the army, the Kashmir War, the emergence of national spirit in the army. But what is most important is not the description or the narration of army life but the human touch of a normal scene of the defence services in Indian life.
Though *Distant Drum* is not a war novel Malgonkar gives a graphic account of the army in action by describing picresquely and effectively the war in Burma and Kashmir.

C.M. Mohan Rao remarks that all the details of the army life is projected through action and experiences of the principal character in the novel (16). N.G. Wale remarks that this novel upholds the importance of the regimental code of conduct, which becomes a guiding force to the Army (76).

C.M. Mohan Rao remarks that though Malgonkar is successful in creating the correct atmosphere of the Indian army in *Distant Drum*, the most important thing is the presentation of the transition from the British Army to Indian Army and the story of success and self realization of a Satpura officer (20). Every experience in the battalion is calculated to bend to mould the character of an army officer to an ideal officer. Very rarely Kiran takes liberty with the traditional rules of the mess life because of his great love for tradition.

The novel is divided into three parts – Regiment, Staff and Active Service. Kiran is the central figure in all these parts.

In the first part, The Regiment, of the novel, the beginning of Kiran’s army career is described. In 1938, he joins the Satpuras. Prior to it he has learnt – how to take it Grey Forth Rifles, a British regiment. Kiran always tries to abide by the High ideals of army of feels a surge of pride. He gives a practical form of what he has learnt from the Academy the Academy taught him:

“The safety, honour and welfare of your country come first always, and every time. The honour, welfare and comfort of the men you command come next. Your own ease, comfort and safety come last, always and every time” (Malgonkar 80).

The teachings of the Academy had left on indelible imprint upon the minds and heart of the hero of the novel. He always gives priority to the safety of