Chapter - Seven

Indo-British Encounter in Malgudi

Since Narayan aims at presenting India and Indian life through his novels, one gets an idea of what was happening in British India if one sees Malgudi as the fictional prototype of India. The impact of the British rule and Christianity on Indian life can hardly be ignored. This Narayan proves by writing about both in Malgudi.

A.R. Wadia says: "With the European conquest of India there came Christian missionaries...Hostels and schools and colleges and orphanages and hospitals run by the Rama-Krishna Mission are a living testimony to the impact of Christianity on Indian life.... Mahatma Gandhi himself was perhaps the greatest Christian in India, though unbaptised."¹

The 'Missionary Spirit' that is at the back of such significant work by the Mission is summed up thus, by Narayan: "A European Missionary....escorted by a group of Indian converts....would station himself modestly at the junction between Vellala Street and Puraswalkam High Road. His speech was delivered in absolutely literary Tamil....as far away from normal speech as could be. But Tamil....cannot be successfully uttered by mere learning; it has to be inherited by the ear. I am saying this to explain why the preacher was at first listened to with apparent attention without any mishap to him. This seemed to encourage him.... Suddenly the audience woke up to the fact that the preacher was addressing them...


2. op. His, "My Days" (Serialised in the Illustrated Evening of India), p.23 (16th June, 1974)
as sinners and that he was calling our gods names... People shouted, commanded him to shut up, moved in on his followers... The audience now rained mud and stone on the preacher and smothered him under bundles of wet green grass.... One would have thought that the man would never come again. But he did, exactly on the same day a week hence at the next street corner."

The above recollection gets echoed in a novel: Srinivas, who was reading a prospective story for Sampath's film, was interrupted a lot by the listeners. "He remembered a street preacher he had encountered in his younger days in his town, a man who came to propagate Christianity and lectured to a crowd, unmindful of the heckling, booing and general discouragement. Srinivas had even seen a grass seller throwing her burden at the preacher's head, but he went on explaining the gospels. Such a faith in one's mission was needed at this moment."

It was this missionary spirit and zeal that accounted for Christian converts in Malgudi: Marco asked Raju how the sixty year-old Joseph who was born near Mangal came to be a Christian. Raju replied that it was owing to a mission somewhere there.

But that was not the only outcome of missionary activities in Malgudi. They did make the people of Malgudi aware of their own problems: Raman asked Daisy when she got interested in the problem of population control. He was told that even when she was young a missionary gentleman had inspired her.

Daisy was able to refuse baptism but made good use of the missionary training: Raman recollected Daisy's biography - how she studied with the help of a missionary organisation.
refused baptism but changed her name to some non-denominational label adopting the name Daisy; how she passed college with the help of a missionary.¹

The work done by the Christian Missions in the field of education cannot be underestimated. V.D. Mahajan writes: "In 1717, the Danish Missionaries opened two charity schools at Madras. They were also instrumental in opening English Schools at other places...but their primary object was not to educate the people but to preach Christianity. The missionaries realised that the spread of English language would help the spread of Christianity in the country. The Bible classes were made compulsory in these Institutions."²

Non-Christians who joined these schools had usually to suffer religious humiliation. Narayan himself was a victim: "Ours was a Lutheran Mission School... The teachers were all converts and to the few students like me who were non-Christians, they displayed a lot of hatred... The Scripture classes were mostly devoted to attacking and lampooning the Hindu gods and violent abuses were heaped on idol worshippers as a prelude to glorifying Jesus... I was the only Brahmin boy and received special attention; the whole class would turn in my direction when the teacher said that Brahmins claiming to be vegetarians ate fish and meat in secret...."³

But Narayan is cautious not to generalise the above personal experience: "Raju would have felt proud to call himself an Albert Mission boy. But he often heard his father

1. PS - p.45 (12 Sept 76)
3. cp. Narayan's "My Days" (Serialised in the Illustrated Weekly of India), pp.22-23 (16th June, 1974)
declare that he did not want to send his boy there as it 
seemed that they tried to convert their boys into Christians 
and were all the time insulting their gods. Raju did not 
know how his father got the notion. *

Narayan also recollects: "What I suffered in the 
class as a non-Christian was nothing compared to what a 
Christian missionary suffered when he came to preach at a 
street corner." *

In the following scene from 'Swami & Friends', 
"Narayan playfully pillories intolerant school-masters, Chris-
tian fanaticism and the less edifying stories retailed of 
the earthly doings of Lord Krishna": 5 "Ebnezer, the fanatic, 
called the Hindu boys wretched idiots and asked why they wor-
shipped dirty, lifeless wooden idols and stone images. He 
asked what their Gods did when Mohamed of Gzni smashed them 
to pieces, had trodden upon them and constructed out of them 
steps for his lavatory... In contrast, he talked about Jesus, 
who could cure the sick, relieve the poor and take them to 
Heaven. He told Christ was a real God... Tears rolled down 
Ebnezer's cheeks when he pictured Jesus before himself. Next 
moment his face became purple with rage as he thought of 
Sri Krishna. He asked the students if Jesus went gadding 
about with dancing girls like Krishna, if their Jesus went 
about stealing butter like that archscoundrel Krishna, if he 
practised tricks on those around him." *

Ebnezer's class another day: "He had taken the 
trouble that day to plod through Bhagvad Gita... In Ebnezer's

1. TG - p.23
2. op. His, "My Days" (Serialised in the Illustrated Weekly 
of India) pp.22-23 (16th June, 1974)
3. op. H.M. Williams, "Studies in Modern Indian Fiction in 
English" - Writers Workshop, Calcutta, 1973 (Vol.I) p.59
4. SF - p.5
hands it served as a weapon against Hinduism... He pulled Bhagavad Gita to pieces, after raising Hinduism on its base... The class Bible lay uncared for on the table.1

Narayan's love of authenticity finds its support in the following words of P.S. Sundaram: "Ebnezar's denunciations of Krishna were not uncommon in Missionary Schools half-a-century ago though now-a-days, Christian teachers are likely to be much more tactful."2

But all the Hindu boys in the Christian schools those days did not take such insults lying down: "Swaminathan's blood boiled. He got up and asked (Ebnezar) why was Christ crucified if he had not practised dark tricks (like Krishna). The teacher told Swaminathan that he might learn it in private."3

Narayan told Ved Mehta4 that he had asked the same question of the Chaplain who ridiculed Ganesha, Hanuman and Krishna.

That such things did not stop at the level of school boys is clear from the letter which V.T. Sreenivasan, Swami's father, wrote to the Head Master of Malgudi's Albert Mission School: "I beg to inform you that my son Swaminathan... was assaulted by his Scripture Master yesterday in a fanatical rage. I hear that the Master is always most insulting and provoking in his references to the Hindu Religion... This is not the place for me to dwell upon the necessity for toleration in these matters... I hope you will be kind

1. SF - p.10
3. SF - p.6
enough to enquire into the matter and favour me with a reply. If not, I regret to inform you, I shall be constrained to draw the attention of higher authorities to these un-Christian practices.

* * * * *

But how were the 'higher authorities' and their administration? At places in the novels an idea could be had about it: Jagan remembered the awful jail-conditions in his days: The Sub-jail was so dirty that the prisoners urinated in a corner of the lock-up. He asked the cousin if the government had improved the conditions since his days and learnt that it was all naturally different in independent India. The Fund Office manager met Sriram in the jail. The chief there permitted them to talk about anything except politics and other banned subjects. The chief in the jail did not allow Sriram to talk about his Granny, though it was not politics. Sriram was warned not to argue.

In this connection, it is interesting to note the reaction of the British Government, as pointed out by P.S. Sundaram, to Narayan's 'Swami & Friends': "The chapter on 'Broken Panes' describing a strike in the school on the occasion of the Non-cooperation Movement...has a historical interest. It is significant that the School Edition of 'Swami & Friends' published in 1945 took care to omit two (the above and another on fanatacism) chapters."

Here is another example of how in colleges there was a curb on the freedom of expression: In the Albert Mission College, Veeraswamy read the paper: 'The Aids to British Expansion in India' to an audience of thirtyfive which

1. SF - pp.6-7 2. VS - p.187
5. cp. His, "R.K. Narayan" - Arnold Heinemann (India), Delhi 1973, p.28
pilloried Great Britain before the historical association and ended by hoping that the British would be ousted from India by force. Next day, Prin. Brown sent a note suggesting that in future, papers meant to be read before the Association should be first sent to him.  

Even some parts of the address prepared to welcome Gandhiji in Malgudi were censored: The Chairman of Malgudi municipality had prepared an address to be read while welcoming Gandhi... The Collector had taken the trouble to go through the address... to make sure that it contained no insult to the British Empire, that it did not hinder the war effort and that it in no way betrayed military secrets. He had to censor it in several places and all those passages which hinted at the work done by Gandhiji in the political field. The picture of Gandhi as a social reformer was left intact and even enlarged; any one who read the address would conclude that politics were the last thing that Mahatmaji was interested in.  

* * * * *  

The Malgudians could not be expected to suffer thus, for long. An awakening was sprouting: Sen, the journalist, felt that they were, as a nation, what they were then, because of their lack of positive grip over their affairs.  

However, this discouraging state of affairs led to the growth of political consciousness that became a routine activity: Raman's normal activities were painting and reading, political analysis and gossip at the Boardless Hotel. Narayan's novels are thematically national in the sense that one finds in them an objective picturisation of life in India. Dr. Iyengar says: 'The pre-occupation with patriotism in one form or another has been characteristic of some of the

significant fiction produced in the country.\(^1\) Though Narayan did not write any political novel as such, he exhibits a strong liking for setting down faithfully the national struggle in his Malgudi and catalogues how political consciousness is growing among its people. Naturally almost all his novels have something to contribute to this topic.

Sriram confronts a timber-merchant with the aim of making him participate in the national struggle. Here is the reaction of the latter: The timber-merchant who was advised by Sriram to refuse to be dragged into the war, and to fight for independence asked Sriram to leave them alone as they did not wish to get into all that bother.\(^2\)

Teachers in rural India did not uniformly support the struggle and naturally, the ignorant rural folk followed suit: A teacher in a village where Sriram had gone to paint 'Quit India', asked Sriram whether they were ready to rule themselves. He was sure, they weren't. The teacher said that he was not one of those who thought that they would be happier when Hitler came, perhaps with the help of people like Sriram. The rural folk thought that the teacher was right and asked Sriram why they should irritate the 'Sircar'.\(^3\)

But the fact that Sriram moved from village to village painting 'Quit India' and helped public opinion to be moulded in favour of the struggle, though slowly, 'reveals that rural India is not so inert and quiescent as it was once assumed'.\(^4\)

Even then, the path of people like Sriram was full of impediments and more often than not ended in pointlessness: Sriram failed to dissuade a small shop-keeper from selling

\(^1\) cp. His, "Indian Writing in English" - Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1973, p.317.
\(^2\) WM - p.72
\(^3\) WM - p.70
foreign biscuits and also to educate the villagers in this. In a flash, the idea passed before his mind Gandhi, his spinning wheel, the hours he spent in walking, thinking and mortifying himself in various ways, his imprisonment - all this seemed suddenly pointless seeing the kind of people for whom it was intended.¹

However, in the Malgudi that is growing one cannot stop the tide. Gokhale's warning to the New Reforms Club in London is seen to be realised in Malgudi. Said Gokhale, 'The educated English-speaking class is steadily growing and unless you close your schools, colleges and universities it will continue to grow. And with the growth of this class, larger and larger grows the number of men who are discontented with the present state of things... What they think today, the whole country thinks tomorrow.'²

Narayan's awareness of contemporary conditions has been rightly appreciated both by H.H. Annaiah Gowda and by C.D. Narasimhaiah in their respective words: "In 'Swami & Friends' the part the student-s played in the National Movement of the thirties is hinted at."³ "We see 'Swami & Friends' at a mass meeting...arranged to protest against the arrest of a political worker...a replica of what was done in adult circles at the time."⁴

Albert Mission School, where the trouble started, is but a representative of what was happening in the schools,

1. W.M. - pp.79 & 83
then; A third form boy declared that there would be no school as one of the greatest sons of the motherland had been sent to gaol. The Head Master appealed to the boys to behave and get back to their classes quietly... The boys stood firm... Thundering shouts of 'Bharat Mata ki Jai' 'Gandhi ki Jai' and 'Gaura Sankar ki Jai' followed.

This is how Gokhale's expectations get fulfilled in Malgudi: "Now zestful adult voices could be detected in the frequent cries of 'Gandhi ki Jai!'.... A spokesman of the crowd told the Head Master that they were not there to create a disturbance. But it was imperative that the school was closed as their leader was in jail and their motherland was on the throes of war."

And Malgudi prepares itself for the Swadeshi Movement: 'The evening's programme closed with a bonfire of foreign cloth... A couple of boys wearing Gandhi caps went round begging people to burn their foreign cloth. Coats and cloth and upper cloth came whizzing through the air and fell with a thud into the fire.'

V.D. Mahajan writes: "There was a lot of discontent in the country... The masses suffered from economic troubles. The middle classes suffered from the bugbear of unemployment. All the rational Indians felt and bewailed the economic exploitation of their country... The economic system of India was adjusted to the needs of the people of England."

This impotent anger brought forth such powerful speeches in Malgudi: "We are three hundred and thirty six

1. SF - p.96  2. SF - p.97  
3. SF - p.97  4. SF - p.98  
5. cp. His, "British Rule in India and After" - S. Chand & Co., Delhi, 1969, p.487.
millions and our land is as big as Europe minus Russia. England is no bigger than our Madras Presidency and is inhabited by a handful of white rogues... Yet we bow in homage before the Englishman! Why are we become, through no fault of our own, docile and timid? It is the bureaucracy that has made us so by intimidation and starvation... Let every Indian spit on England and the quantity of saliva will be enough to drown England."¹

Swaminathan's reaction to the call of boycotting foreign cloth thus symbolises not only the awareness of national consciousness but also the response to it in Malgudi. "With the Lecturer the audience resolved to boycott English goods especially Lancashire and Manchester cloth... Swaminathan was going to wear only Khaddar henceforth. He wished he had come out nude for the meeting rather than in what he believed to be Lancashire cloth."²

The non-cooperation with and opposition to the British policies and administration grows stronger day by day: Dr. Pal, who was visited by Government officials for War-Fund, told them on behalf of Margayya that Margayya did not believe that it was their war. He would never give a pie unless the Congress High Command ordered him to pay. He asked why should they contribute for a Fund with which the British and U.S. fight their enemy. Dr. Pal confirmed that India's enemy was Britain, not Germany. If the Congress commanded them to gather funds for fighting this enemy Margayya would place his entire wealth at the disposal of the country.³

With that resolve they had to be prepared to face untold suffering too: Jagan remembered how as a volunteer over twenty years ago he had rushed into the British
Collector's Bungalow and climbed the roof in order to bring down the Union Jack and plant the Indian flag in its place. The Police had to beat him and crack open his skull. He opened his eyes fifteen days later in the hospital, and lay forgotten in a prison afterwards. Gorpad's father had died facing a policeman's gun. Sriram knew that Bharati's father had also died when he was beaten by the police. Both these took place in the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1920. Bharati's father had died while taking down the Union Jack from the Secretariat at Madras and Gorpad's, when he was picketing a shop where they were selling toddy and other alcoholic drinks.

Even the cream of the society jumps into this fray: Vasu passed his M.A. in 1931. Then he joined the Civil Disobedience Movement against British rule, broke the laws, marched, demonstrated and ended up in jail. He went repeatedly to prison and once when he was released, found himself in the streets of Nagpur.

The Malgudians are taught that patriotism is the virtue and in consequence they view their life as insignificant as against national duties: Sriram's teacher exhorted him to join the Congress, work for the country so that he would go far. He whispered to Sriram not to let down his country, whatever happens. Bharati (along with Sriram) was a little cog in a vast complicated machinery, that was working, in spite of the police hunting down politics everywhere, to eject the British from the land. Gorpad in a voice thick with sorrow, at the thought of his father being shot at by the police, declared to Sriram that he would not rest till the British were sent out of India. Sriram told the Mahatma

1. YS - p.138
3. MM - p.16
5. WM - p.67
2. WM - p.50
4. WM - p.12
6. WM - p.50
that it was his greatest desire in life to take a vow to oust the British from India.¹

Young Malgudians are not content with vows and slogans. Though born in the land of Gandhiji they are diverted towards violence to achieve their country's freedom urgently: Imperialism was Veeraswami's favourite demon. He believed in smuggling arms into the country, and, on a given day shooting all the Englishmen... He was even then preparing for that great work... His education, sleep, contacts and everything, were a preparation. He was even then gathering followers.² Veeraswami told Chandran that he was starting a movement called the Resurrection Brigade which was only an attempt to prepare the country for revolution... Our politicians including the Congressmen were thought to be playing into the hands of the imperialists... Our Brigade will gain the salvation of our country by an original method. About twenty-five had already joined the Brigade and he expected that in two years they would have a membership of fifty thousand in South India alone.³

A.V. Krishna Rao remarks: "It is highly interesting that Narayan links up the cult of violence in the forties with the expatriate organisation of Subhas Chandra Bose - the Indian National Army - born for the liberation of the country from foreign domination."⁴ Narayan does it through his character, Jagadish: Jagadish wanted Sriram to reach an important message to the Indian National Army camped at Belliali. He guessed the probability of Sriram's being shot in this enterprise. But Jagadish enthused Sriram saying that their lives were not very important.⁵

1. WM - p.51  2. BA - p.46  3. BA - p.63
5. WM - p.104
It is amusing to read that Sriram also thought his life as unimportant but for a different reason: Sriram, remembering the frustrations he had experienced with Bharati told Jagadish he did not care whether he lived or died.¹

That such thinking is not limited to not-so-educated adults like Sriram alone is also shown by Narayan: Dr. Menon, a Columbia Ph.D., thought that Americans were saner than their English Cousins in most matters. Krishna said that if they had Americans ruling them, he supposed they would say the same thing of the English people.²

There are educators in Malgudi who disfavour political consciousness but they are met by Kumars, and all is well with Malgudi: Gajapathy thought that Politics need not butt in everywhere... The whole of the West was in a muddle owing to its political consciousness and what a pity that the East should also follow suit. Kumar, the Political Science Lecturer thought that Gajapathy’s opinion were at least a thousand years behind the times and that his was a one-sided view.³

However, this freedom to express their opinions continues in Malgudi even after it overthrows the British: Gupta, the businessman, was always incensed over Government policies at every level - city, state, national and international - and anticipated disaster every morrow.⁴ To the lawyer’s remark that he was printing his invitations elsewhere, Nataraj said that this was a free country and our constitution gave us fundamental rights. He could not compel the lawyer or any one to do what they might not want to do.⁵

1. WM - p.104
2. ET - p.14
3. ET - p.14
4. PS - p.35 (27 Jun 76)
5. MM - p.57
There are people in Malgudi who can have an optimistic political outlook also: Raman's friend, Gupta, spoke in appreciation of national integration saying that he and Raman were from different ends of the country yet doing their respective business in Malgudi.¹

India's cultural heritage and the suffering, the political freedom cost, makes Jagan to develop a deep attachment with the country: Jagan asked Mali why he blamed the country for everything though it had been good enough for 400 millions. He remembered the heritage of Ramayana and Bhagavad Gita and all the trials and sufferings he had undergone to win independence.²

Often, such inexplicable attachment to one's motherland clouds one's capacity for individual thinking is hinted at, very comically, --- by Narayan: Sriram told Mathieson that what they cared most for was to do what Gandhiji had told them to do, that is, spinning the charkha, wearing Khadi, living without luxury and have India ruled by Indians. Mathieson told Sriram that Indians had rejected the opportunity to try it by turning down Cripps offer. But such intricate academic technicalities refused to enter Sriram's head. So he merely said that Mahatma did not think so and there was an end to the discussion.³

* * * * *

'We rarely see the Westerner and the Indian confronting each other' observes C.V. Venugopal⁴ writing about Narayan's short stories. But in Narayan's novels, with a broader canvas, one finds this confrontation based on age-old

1. FS - p.35 (27 Jun 76)    2. VS - p.138
3. WM - p.76
4. cp. His, "The Indian Short Story in English" - Karnatak University, Dharwar, 1972, p.306.
misgivings about the European race. Narayan uses his characters to expose the weaknesses of the Indian as well as the Westerner.

Here, for example, is a carelessly delivered speech: The earnest-looking man, clad in Khaddar lectured that England was inhabited by a handful of rogues and exclaimed that we bowed in homage before the Englishman.¹

Many of Narayan's characters seem to echo what V.D. Mahajan writes: "The Indians resented the attitude of the Englishmen towards them. The Europeans in India were arrogant. They had a very low opinion of the Indian character... No wonder, the relations between the Indians and the Europeans became strained."² A member of the reception committee asked the Collector of Malgudi whether it was the privilege of the ruling race alone to be given the Circuit House and whether Mahatmaji was unworthy of it.³ Chandran thought that Europeans were in India not out of love for Indians but merely to keep up appearances. They would not do the slightest service to Indians, with a sincere heart. He angrily thought why should not those fellows admit Indians to their clubs. It was sheer colour arrogance.⁴ Mani thought that Europeans would shoot Indians as they had no heart.⁵

Statements made by Englishmen even with the best of intentions are likely to be seen with jaundiced eyes in such climate: Mr. Mathieson owned a big estate in Malgudi. Sriram appeared to think that Mathieson led a luxurious life though from the latter's standpoint, it was just a normal

¹ SF – p.93
³ WM – p.75
⁴ BA – p.5
⁵ SF – p.94
life. Sriram heard Mathieson wish that soon all the millions of people might have enough to eat and beautiful houses to live in, hinting at sweet prospects in independent India. Sriram put this statement down as an expression of racial arrogance.¹ Ravi was sacked by Mr. Shilling, the Manager of Englandia Banking Corporation, as he could not please his boss with his work. Srinivas failed to plead with Mr. Shilling to take Ravi back into the Organisation. Finally, he warned Mr. Shilling that he was not living in the India of the East India Company days, reminding him to forget forever that God created Indians in order to provide clerks for the East India Company or their successors.²

Krishna of the Albert Mission College voices his resentment at the failure of the Englishman to Indianise himself: Krishna asked Gajapathy why Prin. Brown magnified his own importance though even after spending thirty years in India he could not say in any one of the two hundred Indian languages: 'The cat chases the rat.'³

But Narayan does not forget that there are some Englishmen like Mathieson, who, though born in England wanted to live in India and thought they were of some use to India as they provided employment opportunities to thousands of workers and labourers.⁴ And there is no lack of Indians like Sriram who, though surprised by such attachment to India, felt that Englishmen thought Indians could only be their servants and nothing else.⁵

* * * * *

1. WM - p. 75
2. MS - p. 107
3. ET - p. 3
4. WM - p. 77
5. WM - p. 77