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Manikpur Junction

By M.B. Lal



Deprived of male company for six months Mary Jacobson, a high spirited Oxford scholar on a long study tour of India in 1943, takes a liking to Nakul Pal, a young fellow passenger who invites her to have tea with him in the dining car of a mail train at Allahabad. She follows him effortlessly from one compartment to another, as if impelled by a divine force, to cope with unexpected happenings during the three-hour journey into Vindhya mountains.

There she finds herself stymied over a trivial issue by a party of tribal pilgrims. These are people who live shut away in a time capsule of their own. She is told that such segregation between communities is essential for the preservation of India's pre-historic Aryan dharma which uses selective breeding amongst humans as its principal instrument of governance.

In this isolationist environment she sees in Nakul a long lost cousin whose friendship she must nurse and cultivate with her feminine arts. On his part the young man spares no pains to prove himself worthy of her favours, what if it involves blackmailing a plenipotentiary, getting bumped in the head by the police and Subhash Bose's guerillas and being fired at by soldiers under British command ?

Published by HEMKUNT Manikpur Junction is a novel describing the adventures of an English girl of Swedish origin during World War-II, in British ruled Gandhian India where she is tracing the roots of Hitler's Aryan fixation in a unique brand of 'sexual fascism'.

Mary has to tread cautiously in a land where everybody looks at her like a suspicious character in detective fiction. The British suspect her of being a German spy. Orthodox Brahmins attack her views on the Hindu caste system which she dubs as the Aryan sexual hierarchy. They want her expelled from the country. Native students and teachers amongst whom she lives shun her as a member of the ruling White race, thus applying to her the infallible Indian caste laws of untouchability in reverse.

This weird setting makes her friendship with Nakul all the more exciting as both of them make silent allowances for their vastly different social, cultural and academic backgrounds. Each moment they spend together brings new surprises.

Mary is adventure loving, even reckless at times, Nakul polite, timid and cautious, yet never unwilling to risk his all to help Mary in critical situations. This is perhaps the right mix for the alchemy of romance to work its silent magic on their hearts and minds as they drift along in the swift current of Time, the ultimate arbiter of their destiny.

Manikpur Junction does not focus on a theme though it seems anchored on the Aryan caste hierarchy which fascinated Hitler. Its main thrust is on recreating the atmosphere of pre-Independence India, touching all religious communities and classes from humble destitutes to Maharajas, from bohemians to dedicated churchmen and Gandhian social workers.

Humorous and light reading, with never a dull moment, the novel refrains from preaching any ideology since the quaint world of the Nineteen – Forties it replicates is itself a message. It reads like a fairy tale from another planet — a country which was so different from today's India, before the creation of Pakistan — less noisy and belligerent but more humane and at the same time exciting and bubbling with romance. It is a thing you can find only in a society which is at once multi-religious and multi-cultural.

As the reader wades leisurely through this 1,80,000- word tale of inter-continental romance, he has ample opportunity to slowly sink into it and feel himself a part of the world of his immediate ancestors.

About Manikpur Junction

Dear M.B.Lal

I've just finished reading Manikpur Junction. Excellent ! It was an enriching experience ! Weaving through romance and adventure, you've narrated the story leading to a philosophical climax - a commentary on today's world. I loved the way you've captured the nostalgic days of the 1940s in Allahabad during the twilight days of the Raj and the height of nationalism. What really makes it delightful reading is the

undercurrent of wry humour that runs all through it - whether the love episodes, or the encounter between Hitler's version of Aryan culture and its Hindu orthodox version.

Sumanta Banerjee
Writer and Critic
19.9.2005
Dehradun

Dear Mr. Lal

I finished reading Manikpur Junction during my journey from Delhi to New York. I just could not put it down. Enjoyed it thoroughly. Although I did not live in British India, it gave me a sense of the period. Discussion with you was amplified and further clarified in the book. Great work.

Satish Tripathi
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