

Mano Majra in *Train to Pakistan*:

Mano Majra is a small fictitious village on the India – Pakistan border and is situated half a mile away from the banks of the Sutlej river, the longest river in Punjab. The place is soaked in the distinctive seasons of Punjab where the summer monsoon and winter monsoon are refreshing. Since Mano Majra plays an important role in the novel, Khushwant Singh had named the novel as *Mano Majra* and published it in 1956. However, as the train plays a crucial role in the novels and affects the lives of the people, its title was changed into *Train to Pakistan*. This tiny village is the locale of Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* which has its own value system, beliefs, interests and spirit.

The opening line of the book – “The summer of 1947 was not like any other Indian Summers” pinpoints that the present is different from the past. It symbolically suggests that the unity the Mano Majrans enjoyed in the past will soon witness the division and brutality. In the initial days of free India, and within the turmoil in Northern India, Khushwant Singh begins his novel portraying the idyllic picture of the village – work in the fields, seasons and the passing trains.

Mano Majra, the Village:

It has only three brick buildings – a Gurudwara, where Bhai Meet Singh, an illiterate priest lives as a caretaker. Gurudwara is the place where people gather in the times of trouble. Towards the end when the Sikh refugees arrive in Mano Majra, they find shelter in the Gurudwara. It is the very place where the conspiracy to attack the train is planned. It is the gurudwara where Jugga comes to ask blessing from the Guru before he makes the supreme sacrifice by saving not only Nooran but the refugees Muslims going to Pakistan. Other buildings are a mosque which is led by the mullah and a weaver Imam Baksh and the home of the Hindu moneylender Lala Ram Lal.

There are only seventy families in the village. The population is half Sikh, half Muslim and a few neo-converts to Christianity. The only Hindu in the village is the money-lender Lala Ram Lal. The Sikhs own all the land in the village and the Muslims are their tenants. The Muslims are either weavers or potters. Since the lives of Sikhs and Muslims are interdependent, they live in harmony in the village. There is no recognised leader of the village. Banta Singh is only a collector of revenue - the lambardar. He is a simple peasant like other Sikhs and has official status because the government officials and police deal with him for any village matters. Only two men voice their opinions at village meetings are – mullah Imam Baksh and Bhai Meet Singh. The village is also known for its badmash number ten –

Juggut Singh, the dacoit. Mano Majra is so isolated from rest of India that villagers do not even know that the British have left; India is divided into two parts and Pakistan is formed. Some know who Mahatma Gandhi is, but it is doubtful whether they know who Mohammad Ali Jinnah is. The poor and illiterate villagers do not have any access like radio or newspaper to get information about what is happening in other parts of the country.

At the outskirts of Mano Majra is the officer's rest house among the trees just north of the railway bridge. In bureaucratic circle, it has some importance. Its popularity is due to its proximity to the Sutlej river and beautiful flora and fauna. Hukum Chand, the Magistrate and Deputy Commissioner stays here and successfully evacuates the Mano Majra Muslims to Pakistan.

Prominent features of the village: River and Bridge

Two prominent features of the village are that it is located on the banks of Sutlej. After the monsoon its waters rise and spread across its vast sandy bed. Its flood waters during monsoon directly affect the lives of the Mano Majra villagers. Secondly, about a mile North of Mano Majra, the Sutlej is spanned by a magnificent railroad bridge. It has eighteen enormous spans which look like waves that go from one pier to another. At each end of it there is a stone embankment to buttress the railway line. On the Eastern end, the embankment extends all the way to the village railroad station. Mano Majra is known for its railway station. Since it has only one track, the station has several sidings where less important trains wait to make the way for important trains. The stationmaster does all the duties. He is a ticket clerk, ticket collector, sends and receives telegrams, and also waves signals to the passing trains. There are some shopkeepers and hawkers who sale food, betel leaves, cigarettes, etc. Hence the station often looks busy. The station and the railway bridge play crucial role in advancing the story towards denouement.

Train as Heartline for Mano Majrans:

Express trains do not stop at Mano Majra. Of many slow passenger trains, only two slow passenger trains stop at the station for few minutes— one from Delhi to Lahore in the mornings and the other from Lahore to Delhi in the evenings. The station is always filled with sounds of puffing of engines, banging of buffers, and clanking of iron couplings. Life in Mano Majra is regulated by the timings of the trains. They are reminders of their duties and rest. The village wakes up when the mail train rushing to Lahore at daybreak gives two long whistles. Then Imam Baksh gives *azan* which is followed by prayers at gurudwara by Meet Singh. By the time the 10.30 train from Delhi arrives the village has started its routine. When the mid-day train goes by, the village stops to take rest. And when the evening passenger

train from Lahore arrives, the villagers call it a day. After the *azan* and prayer at the gurudwara, the village comes to a standstill. This is the pattern till the long, dry and dusty summer of 1947. Though on the border, no refugees have come to the village yet.

However, the Mano Majrans feel something is wrong when the trains coming from Lahore and Delhi which run on the newly created border, are more and more irregular. They are fully packed with people and are either late or run through night. No Goods trains stop at the station; instead ghost trains run past at odd hours between midnight and dawn disturbing the dreams of Mano Majra. Mano Majra is so habituated by the train timings that they are baffled and do not know when to do what things. Imam Baksh waits for Meet Singh to make the first start and Meet Singh waits for Imam Baksh's *azan*; people stay in bed late; children do not know when to be hungry and everyone is indoors before sunset. The station becomes an interesting place where people crowd to watch the crowded slow passenger trains which are unusually late. They are crowded with Sikh and Hindu or Muslim refugees who get off or on the train.

Gradually not only the trains but also the movements of the Sikh soldiers around the station and bridge disturb their peaceful life. The villagers see tents put near the railway station; six feet sandbags with machine guns on them at the signal near the bridge; armed sentries patrolling the platform and no villagers at the station. The crowded station thus becomes a deserted place in no time. Still the villagers are away from the violence happening at other parts.

Mano Majra which has enjoyed communal harmony so far gets disturbed when Malli and his men rob and murder him. The night this incidence happens, the Good's train plays an important role. The movement of the wagons signals the dacoits to enter Mano Majra. The creaking sound of the wagons and their loud collision with the stationary wagons tells Jugga that it would be safe to meet Nooran at the river side. When the train leaves the station, passes the bridge and its rumbling becomes fainter, Hukum Chand feels the privacy to have pleasure with the young prostitute Haseena. Thus, the events that lead the novel ahead – the dacoity, the tryst between Jugga and Nooran and Hukum Chand's love for Haseena have impacted by the train passing through Mano Majra railway station.

Mano Majra for Iqbal Singh:

On the morning after dacoity a young, small, effeminate and westernised man, Iqbal Singh gets down the Lahore bound train at the station. Soon Mano Majra changes from a peaceful village into a disturbed and insecure place. Since Mano Majra is closer to the India Pakistan border, it fetches special significance for the government as well as for the

communists of People's Party of India. His party has chosen Mano Majra for Iqbal Singh because the village is a vital point for refugee movement as it is on the border of India and Pakistan. Moreover, later Iqbal too says that when there is so much blood shade around, he must stop it to avoid further disaster. However, soon he regrets for being there when he realises that his way of living, religious beliefs, and attitude are quite different from Mano Majrans. It is Mano Majra that enforces a different identity upon him. He is falsely labelled as a Muslim and Muslim Leaguer by the subinspector only because he is circumcised. Towards the end we find that when Iqbal's help is urgently needed to stop the killings of Mano Majra refugees going to Lahore, Iqbal fails to perform his duty. Instead he drinks, justifies his cowardly reaction to the violence around and falls unconscious.

Mano Majra is different from Europe where Iqbal was before coming to India. The way of living, codes, and beliefs of Mano Majrans baffle anglicized Iqbal. Being liberal minded, Iqbal doesn't understand the reason why people unnecessarily poke their noses into others personal matters. He is surprised when his religion is doubted because he is clean shaven and circumcised. He does not understand why people determine someone's religion on the basis of one's food habits and beliefs. He is annoyed when he hears Britishers praised by the Lambardar, Imam Baksh and Meet Singh. They have heard about the killings and looting in other parts; hence believe that under the British rule they were much safer than under the new government. His anglicized way of looking at things are different from these villagers. For Mano Majra villagers, the values like truth, honour and financial integrity were 'all right' but they were placed down the scale than being true to one's salt, to one's friendship and fellow villagers. He is surprised to hear that one can lie in the court or cheat for a friend and he is not blamed. Instead he becomes a '*nar admi*' - a he-man, who defies magistrates, police and religion but remains true to friendship. It is beyond Iqbal's comprehension that this very value system bonds the villagers together and be loyal to each other. Even the subinspector is annoyed to see the Sikhs and Muslims living in harmony as if nothing has happened. If the Sikhs are asked why they allow the Mullah to give *azan* every morning and evening when the Muslims are killing the Sikhs in other parts, they answer that the Muslims are their brothers. It is also interesting to note that though Iqbal is an outsider Meet Singh protects Iqbal by purposely calling him Iqbal Singhji to stop others doubting his religion. Iqbal's name and appearance rouse doubts regarding his religion but Meet Singh, a simple, illiterate Bhai has no qualms against it. Through Iqbal, Khushwant Singh shows the spirit of unity and compassion in Mano Majra.

Arrival of Ghost Trains:

The friendly bonding is seen time and again in Mano Majra when ghost trains arrive carrying dead Sikhs and Hindus from Lahore at the station at day time. The incidence becomes a nightmare for the shocked and anxious villagers who gather in the gurudwara and ask for Allah's and Guru's mercy. Though the Sikh community knows that the trains have come from Lahore, they don't even think of taking revenge of this 'incidence' on the village Muslims. Instead both Sikhs and Muslims alike help the police to deal with the 'incidence' by giving them kerosene and wood. For the first time in the memory of Mano Majra, Imam Baksh's sonorous cry does not rise to proclaim the glory of God. It shows empathy as well as condemnation of the deaths of Sikhs and Hindus by the Mano Majra Muslims.

Hukum Chand's Concern for Mano Majra:

Sikh refugees arrive at Mano Majra by crossing the river. They are given shelter and food by the Sikhs and Muslims in gurudwara though the government has ordered the local authorities to camp the refugees at Jullundur refugee camp. Since these Sikhs have not lost much in Pakistan, the atmosphere in Mano Majra is normal. But Hukum Chand knows that once the refugees who have been through massacres and have lost relations arrive at Mano Majra, the situation will get uncontrollable and worse and then the Muslims will be at risk. His immediate concern is the safety of the Muslims and he decides to evacuate them in any way he can. Accordingly, he plans. He keeps Jugga and Iqbal in the jail; arrests Malli and his men; soon gives order to release and take them to Mano Majra to show the villagers that Malli is innocent and dacoit Sultana, a Muslim is the culprit. When the police enquire about Iqbal's behaviour to the villagers, the confused Mano Majrans do not understand why Iqbal and Sultana are unnecessarily dragged in this matter when they have nothing to do with the dacoity and Malli is the real culprit. However, these simple people do not go against the authority.

Spirit of Brotherhood:

Mood and conditions in Mano Majra change gradually. The Sikhs become suspicious about the Muslims when the refugees talk about killings and looting by the Muslims in Pakistan. They hear the stories of Muslims tearing their *Granth*, disrespecting their women, and being ungrateful. And when Muslims hear about the atrocities done on their men and women in other cities, every Sikh, for them, becomes a stranger with evil intention; his long beard looks barbarous and his kirpan seems anti-Muslim. For the first time Pakistan seems a place of refuge for them where there will be no Sikhs. Suddenly centuries of shared culture and values, daily habits, friendship and love crumble. However, for the Mano Majrans, the rootedness to one's land and the bond of loyalty is stronger than religious belonging.

Naturally, this spirit does not allow hatred among the Mano Majra Sikhs and Muslims. Instead they believe that God is punishing them for their sins. In a purely Sikh gathering, when one youth of the village calls the Muslims ungrateful and snakes, Meet Singh silences him by retorting that the village Muslims are innocent and can not be blamed for what is happening outside. For the Mano Majrans loyalty to fellow Muslim villagers is most important than any other considerations. Hence, though all Muslims have been evacuated from many neighbouring villages, the Mano Majrans decide not to ask their Muslims brethren to leave the village since no one asks their sons to get out of the house. At the same they cannot even turn out the refugees from the village since hospitality towards the needy too is important.

The Muslims of Mano Majra trust their Sikh fellows since everybody knows that the threat comes from the refugees from Pakistan and from lots of outsiders roaming around with guns. They are also aware that in new India neither the police, nor the army sent by the central government will give helping hand to them since they too are divided along communal lines. Imam Baksh, crushed by the terrible events, trusts his Sikh friends and is ready to accept their advice regarding his and his people's fate. Banta Singh who is equally disturbed by the hateful sentiments of the refugees infecting Mano Majra, cannot understand why the Muslims should be punished for crimes they never committed. He believes that the Muslims have same right on the land as they themselves have on it. However, since the logic often overweighs the emotions, Meet Singh considering the safety of the Muslims, advises Imam Baksh to take shelter in the refugee camp till the matter settles. Until then he promises him that the villagers will take care of the houses and belongings. All the Sikhs pledge to defend the Muslims till their last breath. Imam Baksh too is aware that the rift created in the village by the refugees is too deep and the only place left for them is Pakistan. Though Pakistan is an unfamiliar place, they don't have any other alternative than to leave the village where they are born, and lived as brothers to the Sikhs. They must leave their homes which their forefathers took hundreds of years to make. The night before the evacuation, the Sikhs and Muslims alike meet each other and cry as if there has been death in the family.

Partition thus impresses a permanent scar on the Mano Majran's hearts when the bond between them is forcefully broken. The innocent and ignorant Mano Majra Muslims leave with a heavy heart for refugee camp with the hope that they will return to their homes when the matters are settled. Thus, the initial hateful mood of the Sikhs changes into sympathy and affinity when the matter of defending and protecting their Muslim brethren gains importance. When the young leader in Khaki challenges the Mano Majra Sikhs, to take revenge on the

Muslims by attacking the train leaving for Pakistan next evening, Meet Singh and lambardar refuse to agree with this idea and defend the Muslims in India who have not killed their men and raped their women. In this sense, Mano Majra becomes a special place where people value loyalty, friendship, brotherhood more than anything else.

Victory of love over Hatred:

Finally, Mano Majra once again emerges as a crucial place when Jugga, the badmash number ten of Mano Majra sacrifices his own life and saves the life of his beloved Nooran and the Muslims of Mano Majra and Chundunnugger. He runs to action instinctively, with no second thought about his religion or about his own safety. No theory guides him to go against the evil force. It is simply and naturally the impulse to save human lives that drives him to self-sacrifice. He, the notorious man of the village shows the nation that love and humanity are more sacred than hatred, killings, massacre, atrocities on women and the religious beliefs. The village witness both – the beginning of the freedom for India from the British and the communal unrest later. Thus, this tiny village assumes a character when it lives on its own terms before freedom and deals with it wisely when the same freedom creates unrest and changes their life altogether.
