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ISSN: 2278-9529

GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Vol. 3, Issue-IV July 2014



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Revisiting History and the National Conflict in Shashi Deshpande's *The Narayanpur Incident*

Archana Bagga
Assistant Professor,
Delhi University

Published in 1982, *The Narayanpur Incident* is Shashi Deshpande's fourth novel for children. It has been variously established that Deshpande deals with a variety of issues even in her books for children including the didactic principle (not the conventional one) which is supposed to be a significant constituent of any children's book. This paper intends to analyze the underlying ideology in *The Narayanpur Incident*. Just like her other novel *3 Novels*, it caters to the need of the society at large by offering a story that carries a moral. That children need a moralistic tale to evolve into virtuous adults is fairly established as one of the aims that books for children thrive to attain. What follows that argument is how inculcating national consciousness is very much a part of that educational enterprise. In other words, what is fairly apparent in this novel, as in the other three novels, is how children were (and still are) tied to the nationalist discourse of the twentieth century vis-à-vis children's literature. What better theme than national struggle could there be to instil in young children the values of nationalism? The pertinent question, then, is to scrutinize how the notion of childhood gets constructed through such a selection.

The purpose of this novel seems to be a fairly simple one, one which is striving hard to make children aware/ conscious of their roles in their family as well as nation. While the intent may seem preachy, the events take place in a way which appears very similar to a practical teaching mode. However, unlike the other three novels by Deshpande, this plot does not have as much pleasure or entertainment to offer as its educational content. Additionally, an 'introduction' has been affixed to this novel for the child readers' better understanding of the events that unfold over the course of the novel. This introduction charts the history of British rule in India, and thus states that it is "1942 Quit India Movement which forms the background to this story." (viii). Interestingly, what inspired Deshpande to write this story was the realization that many youngsters (including her own sons) do not share the same national consciousness as their parents or grandparents who were witness to as well as participants in the fierce battle against the British. Therefore, the explicit aim of the novel becomes to 'train' and 'educate' the younger lot about their nation, national heroes, national values, and virtues of loyalty and patriotism. And so it begins, a tale which has national mission, adventure (for children), history, familial bonding, loyalty, and so on. It is a semi-fictional account which initiates with/ around a particular family and goes on to engulf the entire nation.

The narrative introduces Mohan, Babu, Manju, aged 18, 13, 11 respectively, as the protagonists who belong to a politically conscious family. Since Mohan is eighteen years old and an active revolutionary, the story mostly revolves around Babu's and Manju's perception of the national turmoil. Although having child protagonists is not a necessary condition to classify books under the tag of children's books, *The Narayanpur Incident* foregrounds its status as a children's novel by focussing on the effect the national struggle has on Babu and Manju and numerous other child characters (as well as child readers). It is made apparent right at the beginning that "Appa, Amma and Mohan were all so involved with the congress, Gandhiji and Swaraj . . ." (2), such that it is impossible for Babu and Manju to escape that national zeal. Their learning begins at home since their family is a microcosm of the nation.

In Shobhana Nijhawan's words, "It is within this protected sphere that education and codes of conduct could be best disseminated."¹ The code of conduct mandates an awareness of nationality, national history and their significance. Taking this logic into consideration, it is evident that the novel works towards enlightening children to be the responsible youth/ adults of an emerging nation post-colonization. This education demarcates them from the other children; say Vasant and Shanti, because in a family like theirs education and national awareness are *the* cultural capital. And this is further justified by the fact that the cultural signifiers, like temples and historical monuments, which are in abundance in the trilogy, *3 Novels*, are partially absent from *The Narayanpur Incident*.

Babu and Manju draw inspiration from their father, mother and brother Mohan, who are all actively involved in the national struggle for freedom. They have been situated in the narrative to represent Indian children during the early twentieth century as a whole, who are supposed to gather information and 'learn' from this account of national movement. Manju and Babu, whose lives in the beginning are apparently limited from their house to school, find this hoopla ". . . too dull and tame a thing to get excited about" (2). Later on, they too catch up with the "anti-government fever" (121) which is at its peak all over the country. From their native place to Narayanpur, the novel registers the presence of "a sleeping tiger" that "has been awakened" (120) and it is impossible to ignore its (up)roar.

To a large extent this novel segregates the children from adults, which seems reasonable since national politics is not a child's play. However, it is equally wrong to assume that the nation or the novel is completely colonized by the adults and children have a negligible role whatsoever. Since the purpose of the national discourse is to make national politics fairly understandable to the young people of the nation to carry forward the legacy of independence, the novel does portray the entry of the child characters in the movement in whichever way possible.

Just like the child protagonists represent Indian childhood in the twentieth century, this particular family of five is a representative of the entire nation. In other words, what happens in/with this small unit is in no way unique but is universally applicable to other parts of the nation too. The newspaper reports and other sources of information clearly highlight the pan-Indian quality of the national movement/struggle which "forms a background to this story." Interestingly, there seems to be a very thin line between background and foreground, since everything revolves around not just the characters but also the national debate. This leads to a host of other relevant questions regarding Indian history, and historicity that *The Narayanpur Incident* appropriates as its subject.

As highlighted, the novel locates itself in a nationalist phase. Thus, the most suitable approach to begin with should be historical. Also, it is important that the part which Deshpande has picked up as the material for her work is supplemented with the entire picture for complete appreciation as well as critique. A national project towards achieving independence clearly establishes the nation's antagonism towards imperialism as well as colonialism. Fundamentally colonialism means the rule of one country over another, under the guise of 'civilizing mission'. Overtaking the East India Company, Britain established itself in India by 1858. It was around this time that India was officially declared a British colony. The British troops which were attracted to India because of India's (natural) resources (spices, textiles, etc.) and consumer market ultimately overtook Indian government

¹See Hindi Children's Journals and Nationalist Discourse (1910-1930).

politically as well economically, founding themselves firmly on the Indian ground. This resulted in British monopoly over all the government run institutions, like schools, colleges, post offices, transportation, and so on. Their modus operandi was bent upon breaking up the old (feudal) order of self-sufficient villagers and creating a new elite class which would be English educated. The class thus created was to become mediators between the British (masters) and Indian (slaves). As stated in Thomas Macaulay's *Minute on Indian Education* (1835), the obligation of this class was to assist in the smooth functioning of British rule. The flipside of the creation of this class was awareness in the educated minds regarding subjugation of Indian masses at the hands of the British.

It was with the creation of Indian National Congress (1885) that India took first step towards independence. In 1920 Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, revered by Indian people as the Mahatma, became the face of the congress party and put forward his 'mantra' of non-violence. During this time the congress leaders were planning various means to get rid of the disease of colonialism which had enslaved people not just physically but also mentally. There was the 'satyagraha campaign' launched by Gandhi, which unfortunately failed to garner much support, thus causing a blow to the prestige that congress party had enjoyed so far. In his book, *Gandhi, Nehru and the Quit India Movement: A Study in the Dynamics of a Mass Movement* (1984), V.T. Patil registers Gandhi's despair at the failure of his first big attempt at rescuing the nation. He states how Gandhi's writings in the *Harijan*² reveal his plans for India's independence which was not possible with long periods of inactivity for it would result in further confirmation of India's status as a silent, passive colony. Gandhi's nationalist fervour was also visible in his speeches, his writings in the *Harijan* as well as his letters exchanged with the then Viceroy Linlithgow, all of which emphatically stress India's need for a future free of colonial rule. Here a quote from Gandhi's writings must be added to substantiate this point. Among his most powerful statements in the *Harijan* (in 1942) to throw light upon his bent of mind during this period is ". . . in this struggle every risk has to be taken in order to cure ourselves of the biggest disease- a disease which has shaped our manhood and almost made us feel as if we must forever be slaves. It is an inseparable thing. The cost of the cure, I know, will be heavy. No price is too heavy to pay for the deliverance." (qtd in Patil 8). Added to this was the disappointment as a result of the failure of Cripps mission in March/ April 1942. Stafford Cripps, who was sent to pacify things on the Indian front by offering 'constitutional advances', was criticized by congress men for trying to deceive Indians into submission for he had absolutely no radical promises to make regarding Indian freedom. On top of that, there was an increased bitterness due to the communal strife creating disharmony between Hindus and Muslims. This apparently was the cause of much distress to Gandhi, who had been making a plea for 'unity' among the masses to confront the British, failing which India would never be able to taste freedom. This was another example of moral weakness of the masses, involved in petty fights, that finds mention in his *Harijan*. However, Gandhi was judicious enough to realize that this discord was the result of British manipulation of the masses that came to be known as the 'divide and rule policy.' Therefore, it is also important to mention that Gandhi did not ignore the Muslim cause either, which he supported during the 'khilafat agitation'³ along with the promise of establishing ". . . a

² After having written in an English newspaper, *Young India*, till 1932, Gandhi switched to writing in *Harijan* from 1933 onwards. He wrote in these papers from jail during the time of British colonial rule. The paper, which was regularly published from 1933-1948, exhibited his views on the socio-political conditions as well as necessities during the colonial rule in India. Some of the issues that find a mention in *Harijan* include the need of unity among the masses and the contribution by women.

³ Although a strongly pan-Islamic political movement during the early 20th century, it found Gandhi's support because it was an important milestone in establishing Hindu-Muslim links. Also, it ignited the nationalist temperament during the British rule that culminated in the non-cooperation movement.

provisional government representing all segments of political opinion and interests in the country.” (Patil 16). Unfortunately all these efforts went down the drain since M.A Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League, was bent on creating a different nation for Muslims. His exhibition of an anti-nationalist discourse during the struggle weakened the unity among the masses which was of utmost necessity for the success of the movement. British, inevitably, took advantage of this demand for partition adding more fuel to the fire. Moreover, the situation was getting out of hand because there was also the fear of Japanese invasion. Gandhi was of the opinion that he could take Japan’s help for ousting British from India. He also came up with the idea of having negotiations with Japan (and Britain) prior to the initiation of mass disobedience movement, which always ran the risk of causing more harm than good for British was much more prepared with military equipment. Since Nehru opposed this view, Gandhi also realized the drawback of such negotiations which would have simply meant replacing one master with another. The movement’s inevitability stemmed from the fact that India had to display to the world its fundamental right to independence. Following this argument, he mentioned in *Harijan* that “They (British) may need to remain in India for preventing Japanese occupation . . . Therefore I will tolerate their presence in India not in any sense as rulers but as Allies of free India. This of course assumes that after the declaration of withdrawal there will be a stable government established in India.” (qtd in Patil 21). After the rejection of this proposal Gandhi and Nehru had no option but to finally launch a mass civil disobedience movement with the slogan ‘Quit India.’ While there was difference of opinion between Gandhi and Nehru vis-à-vis the movement, the AICC gave full support to Gandhi and the resolution was passed on 7 August 1942. The conflict between their opinions was evidently worked out and after arriving at an agreement, congress put forth a brave front in the battle for independence. Having experienced near defeat in the earlier operations (non-cooperation movement and salt *Satyagraha*), this time congress was all set with the mantra of ‘do or die’. It was this spirit that aroused the entire nation into action which was of course not an instance of narrow nationalism but for the larger cause of supporting democracy rather than authoritarianism during the war period.

Despite the assurance that the masses had agreed to Gandhi’s appeal for non-violence, practically the policy could not withhold radical/ revolutionary action for long, resulting into a violent breakout from the peaceful pact. As a result, Gandhi and other relevant congress leaders were put behind the bars, causing even further dismay and anarchy. In *Congress and Quit India Movement*, S.R. Bakshi documents the concrete historical episodes that Gandhi’s arrest evoked. Indian history stands witness to the national outcry as a result of the bitterness caused by the detainment of national leaders. The resentment was not restricted to the urban population, but the rejoinder from the rural areas was startling too. People had come out of their homes, abandoning all emotional ties to fight for mother India. This was, to a large extent, the outcome of Gandhi’s speeches in formal and informal gatherings in which he had urged the masses to join hands and fight together for a common cause. Also, as Indian economy was mostly agrarian and the majority of people were to be invited from the rural sector, Gandhi and Nehru insisted on the use of ‘cooperation’ to achieve an egalitarian society post-independence. The unity thus accomplished and the retaliation thus demonstrated included attacks on all the Indian property now under British control so much so that “. . . the machinery of the government was paralysed and dislocated, and the worst effect was glaringly visible in U.P., C.P. and Berar, Bengal, Assam, Bihar, Gujrat, Andhra and Karnataka.” (Bakshi 203). The demonstrations, as visible from the data, soon took a pan-Indian turn, shocking the British troops into reacting like a maddened tiger ruthlessly killing or at least wounding the (innocent) masses. India during this phase, in 1942, had become a

fierce battleground with pervasive images of patriotic fervour, burnt buildings, lathi-charge, bloodshed, and so on.

As was mentioned earlier, the force behind such demonstrations and violent means was largely constituted of the youth, including children, women and those from the lower/backward classes/ castes. Why this point is relevant has a twofold answer. First, the latter, that is women (students, housewives), children and lower class/ caste (industrial labour and farmers) who were largely the marginalized lot devoid of any say in the majority of decisions, now played an important role and secondly, it was an authentication of Gandhi's and Nehru's appeal of cooperation and unity among the Indian masses despite all obstacles manifested in the repressive strategy. The plan was to loosen the grip of the British on the Indian soil for which British dominated terrains became the major targets, which included looting banks, burning police stations, railway tracks, and so on. The result of this havoc cost the government lakhs of rupees, a severe blow to the British in terms of its economic hold on India. The heroism of the general masses, the ordinary man and woman can be gauged by the remarkable contribution by the *Maran Sena* (suicide squad) which was a severe challenge for the police force to manage. These volunteers who defied every police barrier while marching towards a free India, were truly the representatives of the future India which has no fear of the British and its ideals whatsoever. The appeal of Gandhi had truly touched Indian hearts.

Although Gandhi had been a firm advocate of non-violent and peaceful ways of resistance, his modus operandi was certainly dynamic. V.T Patil notes that in 1942 Gandhi “. . . gave a call for direct action which was nothing less than an invitation to mass violence.” (26). He also quotes from the *Harijan*:

People must everywhere learn to defend themselves against misbehaving individuals no matter who they are. The question of non-violence and violence does not arise. No doubt the non-violent way is always the best, but where that does not come naturally the violent way is both necessary and honourable. Inaction here is rank cowardice and unmanly.” (26)

Similar views were echoed in Nehru's speeches. For instance, while addressing a meeting at Gorakhpur around the same time Nehru asserted that “Only jail going is not act of Satyagraha. The world is militarised these days. Military tactics are being adopted. Every person has to risk his life and unless we risk our lives we cannot be free.” (qtd in Patil 27). Even though the result of the civil disobedience movement was not that exhilarating, India had effectively conveyed the message across, which was that Indians were/ are no longer willing to be subdued by any foreign rule at all.

What has been done till now is registration of a brief outline of the historicity of the movement. This is an important aspect of this study since the ‘incident’ in *The Narayanpur Incident* is all about the political endeavour towards freedom. It skilfully captures this national sentiment demonstrated through attacks on all the major ideological centres/ institutions that served British interest, such as, post offices, government schools, colleges, means of communication (telephones) and means of transportation (railways). This is done to send an anarchic message to the British government in the form of Hartals, processions, meetings, and demonstrations where people raise anti-raj slogans. Also, the movement includes resorting to and valorization of *swadeshi* goods which includes burning foreign clothes and rediscovering *khadi* as Indian fabric. It is also expected of people to quit jobs that serve British interest. Added to this, is the aim of hoisting national flag on the institutions under the possession of a foreign government marking the end of an imposed colonial rule, at

least unofficially. The novel is full of such portrayals complimenting the historical documentation.

Let us now examine the “introduction” meant to initiate the child readers into the realm of Indian history highlighted above, particularly the history of British colonization and Indian resistance. Consider the following lines from the novel:

It was in 1631 that the English came to India for the purpose of trade. Then, in 1858, after the great revolt, the British Crown took over from the East India Company and India became a Part of the British Empire. The British finally left India in 1947 . . . It was Mahatma Gandhi, with his strange new weapons like satyagraha, non-violence and non-cooperation, who brought the masses of India into the freedom struggle . . . It was then, on 8 August 1942 in Bombay, that the AICC session passed the famous ‘Quit India’ resolution. ‘Quit India and give us our freedom,’ India was calling. (vii)

The introduction then goes on to shed light on the reaction of the British government to the AICC resolution resulting into an arrest of all the important leaders, including Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. It is Mahatma Gandhi’s arrest which instigates people into action, when “. . . hundreds and thousands of ordinary people threw themselves into the struggle, courageously facing all the terrible consequences.” (viii). The importance of this introduction is twofold, firstly it roots the novel in a characteristically Indian ground, and second, it valorizes the heroism of “ordinary people”. Throughout the novel, leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Rajendra Prasad, Maulana Azad, Vallabhbhai Patel, etc., are absent for they have been arrested. Nonetheless, their petition is sustained by other loyal Congress men and women.

There are broadly two groups fighting for the national cause, men and women of the older generation, followers of Gandhi’s idealist plan of non-cooperation/ non-violence (Appa, Amma, Dinkar Kaka, headmaster, etc.) and those of the younger generation (Mohan, Suman, Arvind, Saddanand, etc.) who are not really in favour of “timid little gestures” like “satyagraha and going to the jail tamely.” (5). Fundamentally, both the groups have pledged to keep the spark ignited by Mahatma Gandhi alive. Whereas Appa revels on Mahatma Gandhi’s mantra: “We shall do or die. We shall either free India or die in the attempt. We shall not live to see the perpetration of slavery” (5) and is convinced that “Gandhiji’s way was the right way” (6), Mohan is sceptical of its credibility, for he is sure that “. . . force is the only thing the British will understand and respect.” (5). While Appa opts for public procession and meetings and a speech therein which is sure to culminate into his arrest, Mohan’s motto is to keep fighting even if that means “Going underground” (18). Mohan is accompanied by Saddanand in this revolutionary struggle. Together, they carry out various violent techniques of revolt through which they are finally able to stir British monopoly. In fact, the way they execute their plan of action has been successful in giving the British sleepless nights.

Initially, the novel seems to be split into two halves, both sides working towards that common goal which would result in a united nation. This is the union which Gandhi had always dreamt of. The two halves per se constitute of the educated Indians on the one hand and rural uneducated Indians on the other, both of whom need to come together to attain and maintain a free egalitarian nation. Contrary to widely held opinion regarding English language Indian (children’s) writing, the characters from rural areas have not been used in a token manner in Deshpande’s novels for children. Neither is there any visible urban-rural divide, nor are the people from the lower/ backward ranks manipulated in any way. Instead

they have been treated as equal citizens, who are to participate in large numbers for the struggle of 'their' nation and who will have equal rights once India accomplishes the goal of independence.

The Narayanpur Incident starts with the impatient anticipation of the AICC resolution and once it is passed in Bombay on 7-8 August 1942, waves coated with nationalistic zeal get transmitted across the nation. Manju's and Babu's family is one of those many Indian families, which is ecstatic with the prospect of participating in ". . . a mass civil disobedience movement." (3). Unfortunately, it is sooner than later that this ecstasy turns into dismay with the news that ". . . The Mahatma has been arrested." (9). The novel portrays quite realistically how the British expects that with the arrest of leaders, leaderless masses would automatically withdraw from this movement. This plan, however, backfires. The movement gains momentum like never before. People join in from all sectors such that the void left behind by the Congress leaders does not hamper the movement.

The novel also takes under its canvas Gandhi's ideal "12-point programme" which is later translated in Hindi and circulated throughout the nation. The programme included ". . . general *hartals* of 24 hours throughout the country"⁴ to be observed by people from all sectors of the society from businessmen to students and from *zamindars* to labourers. This first step is accompanied by public meetings in the rural areas/ villages to explain the purpose behind the movement so that they are well-prepared for all kinds of contribution and sacrifice. To evoke the national sentiment 'slogans of freedom' (*Vande Matram, Jai Hind*) are shouted with full vigour so as to demonstrate aversion to colonial rule. Similarly, all the government servants, including the police, are supposed to quit, students to walk out of schools and colleges. This subtle step is complimented with boycotting foreign clothes, and disruption of the means of British control. These radical steps need to conclude with an alternate form of Indian government. Since the British is expected to suppress all these attempts by employing the Indian police force into using *lathis* on their own countrymen, policemen and jail wardens are also shown to be divided in their allegiance towards their nation. The aim is to not let the British contain the movement for sooner or later they are expected to run out of repressive weaponry. Along with such drastic steps, people also get assurance that as and when the British is expelled from the country due to their contribution, everyone would be restored to/ re-employed in their respective jobs.

Since the introduction makes the novel sound self-confessedly realistic, the directions which were followed during the actual struggle find a mention in the novel too. After the resolution and the subsequent arrest of Gandhi and other Congress men, follows a "grand" (14) yet peaceful hartal in which Indian masses, from shopkeepers to the tongawallas and the coolies, join hands to display their utter respect not just for the Mahatma but also their nation. People hoot slogans, "Mahatma Gandhi ki jai" (20, 30, 31, 38), "Vande Matram, Bharat Mata ki jai" (30) along with motivational speeches, like the one given in the street and in Mohan's college. Suman's confident appeal full of patriotic devotion, "Join us, let us unite and drive out these foreigners. Wake up, all of you. Swaraj is not far. Swaraj is near, if we all unite" (52) powerfully resonates in the college premises, ending with the Indian flag "fluttering on the roof" (53) of the college building. This is the manifestation of another pre-decided plan of Gandhi who had instructed people to hoist national flags on government buildings. Then, there is a public meeting at Market Square in which Appa tries to invoke a similar sentiment. Correspondingly, everywhere there is the echo of the cries like "We are free. We will not be ruled by you anymore!" (55). The purpose of the self-avowed movement is clear. The stage is

⁴ See Patil's essay "Strategy and Tactics of the Quit India Movement" 39.

set, all people have to do at this juncture is prioritize their antagonism towards the British (policy) more than petty class and regional rivalry, which will instil in them the spirit of revolt, either in non-violent or violent manner.

Gandhi's aim had a dual purpose. Firstly, he yearned to oust the British rule by using dynamism of the masses; secondly when the masses had united, it gave him a better opportunity to re-define national links. Gandhi had repeatedly stressed on the pertinence of national unity and erasure of class and caste based divide. AICC resolution was richly resonant with Gandhi's wish of an egalitarian and democratic society. It clearly stated that the government formed after India gains independence will be a ". . . composite government, representative of all important sections of the people of India . . . to promote the well-being and progress of the workers in the fields and factories and elsewhere to whom essentially all power and authority must belong." (Patil 68). Whereas for the landlords and other middle-class Indians the conditions were still manageable, the farmers and workers were the ones facing utterly dreadful poverty, and other such burdens. Therefore, it was also crucial to address the problems of these marginalized groups. *The Narayanpur Incident* tries to insert this point into the plot. Although Deshpande does not take into account their poverty and plight, she does include those from the rural zone and their contribution when the nation is at stake. The most appropriate examples here would be that of Timma and Sangya, Annu Kaka's "most trusted servant" (85). Since the copy of Gandhi's translated word has reached them, it may be assumed that there is a network of those from the lower classes, whose conscience has also been awakened for the national cause. As soon as Babu reads the pamphlet, he explains to these men how after the resolution Congress leaders have been arrested; with the implicit provocation that now the time is ripe that "Every Indian who desires freedom and strives for it must be his own guide urging him on along the hard road where there is no resting place and which leads ultimately to the independence of India." (Patil 70-71). Sangya does get the message and he becomes a part of the movement in at least whichever way he can help. For instance, he becomes a messenger, he fights the Sub-Inspector and the police-patil when they beat the innocent village children and is even heroic enough to take the blame for the same. Contributions, as minimal as these, also prove his loyalty towards the nation and national cause. However there is no other character from the lower ranks to testify this argument further which seems slightly disconcerting, since risk of the message apparently conveyed to the children, then, is that the movement was run and owned only by the middle-class. Also, Sangya's status as "servant", a 'subordinate' is highly problematic because this further creates a master- servant relation against which India is essentially fighting.

At the same time, one characteristic facet of the movement that the above mentioned instance reiterates is the belief of children's books in 'unity in diversity'. This diversity encapsulates the involvement of different classes as well as the opposite sex. The introduction of this aspect proves widely beneficial to teach the national (perhaps slightly futuristic) ideology which does not differentiate between persons on the lines of class and/or gender. *The Narayanpur Incident* undertakes to initiate a discussion on this subject quite remarkably. First, there is Amma and her radical notions about gender neutrality, which she inculcates in Manju too, such that whenever Babu plans to pull her leg vis-à-vis her gender and its limitations, impromptu comes her reply: "so what?" (6, 27). Suman, on the other hand, has already garnered and nurtured such notions of gender equality. While it is not advisable to generalize, she can still be termed as the representative of all those women who participated in the national struggle with equal fervour irrespective of gender restrictions. In Suman, one gets the glimpse of the educated middle-class protagonists, like Jaya and Sarita, characteristic

of Deshpande's other novels.⁵ Yet Suman embodies much more. She is an educated young woman, who is not confined within the conventional Hindu identity of a daughter, wife or mother. Instead she epitomizes the emerging woman who has to fulfil her obligation towards her nation as much as her own family. She is Mohan's comrade-in-arms, participating in the movement with absolute devotion and fortitude. She translates Gandhi's speech, helps with cyclostyling, and also raises her voice against the typically suppressive ideological approach of her college Principal. She can become that model for child readers, which was fairly missing from the gender biased 'male-hero tradition'. With relevant names like Sarojini Naidu and Kamala Nehru, *The Narayanpur Incident* evokes that spirit of womanhood without which the struggle would not have been possible. Together Amma and Suman personify women's competence that leads to their participation in the struggle via private (domestic) as well as public sphere. Although Amma never goes out for public meetings and demonstrations, she can in no way be termed passive. She is as active as Suman or Appa or Mohan, in the way she is completely devoted to the national cause and offers help in any and every possible way. She is proven conscientious time and again such that neither does she let her familial attachments hinder the national struggle nor does she reveal anything to the police. While it may be acknowledged that Deshpande portrays such powerful women characters, there are precisely two things that problematize such accreditations. Firstly, women from the lower classes are almost absent from the national movement. The only thing that may redeem Deshpande is the mention and subsequent anticipation of how Amma convinces other women in the village to participate in the movement. Secondly, there is a disparity between the participation of Suman, who is unmarried, and Amma, who is married and has children. This also becomes a glaring comment on the institution of marriage. While Appa seems to be liberal regarding his views, one never sees Amma participate in the struggle as openly and defiantly as Suman.

However, through the examples of Amma and Suman, the novel illuminates the blurring of borders of indoors and outdoors during the struggle, since women's involvement in the movement had become quite crucial. Women's participation was further facilitated by Gandhi's political appeal. His views regarding women emancipation were circulated at great length. He often stressed that "She can become the leader in Satyagraha which does not require the learning that books give but does require the stout heart that comes from suffering and faith."⁶ The message that was sent across was that women's involvement in the struggle was as legitimate as that of men for they were to inhabit India with men as free citizens. Moreover, since women contributed in all sorts of political endeavours, their political involvement thus reaped benefits that are known to the world. However, notwithstanding the advancement this kind of contribution brought, gender inequality among the lower ranks still persists. Unfortunately, Deshpande fails to present this stark reality due to which the credibility of the novels also goes a notch down.

Apart from an attempt to nullify the barriers of caste, class and gender, the novel also highlights how the young members of the nation also became a part of the national movement. Although it may sound contradictory to what was mentioned earlier about child protagonists being fairly passive in this novel, the children end up affecting the national tide, especially in the Narayanpur village. Firstly, it is the confidence which the adults place in

⁵ Jaya is the protagonist of the novel *That Long Silence*, whereas Sarita is the lead in *The Dark Holds No Terror*. In the first chapter these novels are analyzed briefly and it is established that both these heroines, like the other protagonists of Deshpande's novels, are modeled on the principles of liberal feminism such that they realize that in any society women are equally important if not more.

⁶ Gandhi's writings in Harijan 12-2-1940. <http://www.mkgandhi.org/journalist/womanrole.htm>.

children during the movement which is relevant. For instance, throughout the novel Babu and Manju know about the modus operandi and future plans of the Congressmen, sometimes even their whereabouts which other children like Gopya, Vasant, Shanti, etc., know nothing about. Their family informs them about the most clandestine affairs, which say their neighbours/relations are highly sceptical of sharing with children (either to protect the children or the secret). It is this loyalty and trust within the family that is symbolic of the faith and allegiance towards the nation. Apart from this, children's contribution in the form of messengers is also noteworthy. They are busy "carrying messages from home to home and running all kinds of errands." (121). Again, Deshpande has drawn this strategic mechanism of employing children as mediators from the actual historical records since children seemed to be the most suitable for the job for their stereotype of being 'innocent' (read having nothing to do with serious matters). Also, the movement employed the energy and enthusiasm characteristic of children, for spreading the word of Gandhi via pamphlets.

Secondly, it is the tragic incident between the policemen and village children where the actual violence as manifested in the struggle is materialized. While earlier the struggle is considerably a game for children, this particular incident not only symbolizes a turn from 'Gandhi caps' to violent bloodshed wounding many innocent lives, it also evokes in children and their parents a deep hatred for the British allies and their repressive ideology. This instance almost acts like an initiation ritual when the novel makes clear that now children will also partake of the national cause.

To elucidate the first point mentioned above, child protagonists' relationship with their parents, especially their mother, is an important aspect for this discussion. Since Appa and Mohan are away, in jail and in hiding respectively, Babu and Manju have only their mother to draw inspiration from. Amma shares Appa's political views and the model of non-violent freedom struggle and thus just like everyone else she is also highly conscious of the national scenario. She is directly contrasted with the other women (housewives) whom ". . . she had begun visiting . . . talking to them, persuading them, explaining to them" (121) that their first obligation is towards the nation, how can they think of ". . . nothing but what to cook for the next meal?" (121). Similarly, Manju snaps at Gopya once when he underestimates girls' capabilities and boasts how her Amma has taught her that "Girls can do anything . . . Look at Sarojini Naidu. Look at Kamala Nehru." (11). Later on Shanti also disapproves of Vasant's sexist tactics by telling him how Sonu- auntie (Amma) ". . . says it is wrong to talk that way." (72). Girls, according to Shanti and in turn Amma, do not ". . . always play with pots and pans" (72). They are capable of much more. Amma has been able to prove this point by her own actions. The most important lesson that she teaches her children at this juncture (in 1942) is the spirit of resilience, determination and cooperation by helping in the struggle in any which way possible. Primarily, she is shaping an educated/ learned youth who have to back up the nationalist vision of Congressmen. Educated and aware of political upheavals that she is (reads 'newspapers'); she realizes the importance of proper education. Therefore, as soon as the British government locks the private schools with the fear that these schools may ". . . have been carrying on subversive activities" (25), she arranges for a tutor for Babu and Manju, not just once or twice but thrice, so that their studies do not suffer. She sincerely tries to impart formal as well as informal education, included in which are national values as well as beliefs. Towards the end of the movement, when the chances of victory seem bleak, it is the children who show that spark which assures their mothers that the flame as set by Congress leaders will remain alive. In the novel this happens quite literally, despite the severity of "Annu-Kaka gone, Sangya gone, Arvind and the others arrested, Bhima dead, Manju lying hurt" (136), Babu, Manju, Vasant and Shanti ". . . light the lanterns" (138) so that darkness does not overcome either their house or their nation. This is also important if one goes back to the 7 August resolution which clearly laid "Much is hoped for from the

students in this fight, and it is hoped that they will fulfil the expectations of the people.”⁷ Secondly, as mentioned above, she introduces the masses, especially women, to the movement making them an ‘active’ part of it rather than upholding hesitation due their class and gender. Thirdly, she supports the movement by helping to translate Gandhi’s speech for the masses. This arouses in the masses a nationalist temperament as never before. This speech gets photocopied in their house, producing hundreds of copies which later on reach remote villages and even uneducated Indians, like Sangya (Annu Kaka’s servant) in Narayanpur. Needless to mention, Amma surely inspires and motivates her children into becoming the future of the nation, future which is enlightened and unbounded by colonial rule as well as obsolete practices vis-à-vis gender.

For such attempts to turn fruitful, children’s education system also plays a vital role. The one distinction *The Narayanpur Incident* clearly makes is between education imparted in government schools and in private schools. Before launching into a discussion of that, a slight divergence is necessary, the purpose of which is to emphasize the relevance of schools in children’s lives. Louis Althusser calls institutions like schools, ‘ideological state apparatuses’⁸ which are accountable for making an individual a social, economic and political being. Whatever the child is supposed to learn in the two primary ideological institutions, namely family and school, leaves an indelible mark on a child’s psyche, making her accept the contemporary social scenario as the most natural thing. She, thus, adapts to her surroundings, gets accustomed to the ideologies, never noticing all this while that there can be other openings or exits. It is this narrow ideology again which compels the social entity to see all the other openings, possibilities, alternatives as abnormal, illogical and thus unacceptable. Not realizing this ‘interpellation’, systems get accepted, propagated, and carried on from one generation to another. Two systems or worldviews that concern the present study are the British colonialism and Indian nationalism. And although the national sentiment has always made its mark, nineteenth and twentieth century were extremely crucial for this ideology to proliferate.

The Narayanpur Incident is a testimony of how one also needs ideology to mark one’s identity and visibility. This happens by showing allegiance either to the dominant system or the alternative one. The novel encapsulates broadly two ideologies, imperialism and anti-imperialism, at loggerheads. Also, it is clear that Babu and Manju, the child protagonists, are still minors who are supposedly incapable of making their own decisions. Now the declaration of their minor status in the social, political and economic sense makes them vulnerable to the extent of being gullible playthings at the hands of ‘adults’ who possess the power to distort and manipulate their perception of the world. As pointed earlier Babu and Manju belong to a politically conscious and active family, one which instils in them national dreams and aspirations. Similarly their ‘learning’ is all about national and inter-national understanding of events ranging from the India’s colonial status, ‘Quit India’ resolution to the World War. It was also mentioned that Amma is quite worried about their ‘right’ education. It is for this reason that they are sent to private school, since all the government property, including schools and colleges, is under British control. Now this divide between government schools and private schools is important. Although Babu’s and Manju’s teaching begins at home, with all the members so engrossed in the nationalist ideology, their formal education is

⁷Quoted in Patil’s book, 74. He has taken it from the translation of the printed instruction in Hindi issued by Congress on 9 August, 1942.

⁸ See Louis Althusser’s book *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (1971). In his discussion on ideology and ideological state apparatuses, Althusser charts the effect of social instruction on social subjects. The ideological apparatuses construct human identity and all the other things including desires, values, and preferences such that any person’s contact with these apparatuses constitutes her/ his ‘common-sense’ about the society. Moreover, ideology is never static and homogenous.

also quite important to build their impressions about the world. Throughout the novel, Babu and his friends show disgust towards government educational institutions. This is complimented by Vasant's admiration of Babu's learning and skill, and his subsequent desire to quit the government school he attends and join a private one. The obvious fear hovering in the minds of parents' like Appa and Amma is a fairly simple one. They are afraid that the government schools will corrupt their children's minds with 'western ideology' which essentially upholds colonialism. Therefore, Babu and Manju are sent to a private school, the aura of which is deeply nationalist. It is equally to the credit of teachers/ tutors who awaken in children a political consciousness. Here it is important to compare the two kinds of tutors available in *The Narayanpur Incident*. In the first category, there is the headmaster and the other teachers of Babu's school who are all ". . . nationalists, patriots, and followers of Gandhi." (8). Babu's history teacher, whose glimpse the readers do get, it seems has been making his pupils aware of the national and international issues that concern India at the moment. So does Arvind, whom Annu Kaka chooses to be Babu's and Manju's tutor in Narayanpur. Arvind is also a nationalist; the only difference between him and the other teachers at Babu's school is that unlike them, he is a revolutionary. Arvind, Babu and Manju feel, does not ". . . seem so much to teach as to share exciting information." (83). What seems so awe-inspiring to both the children is the freshness that he brings to the mode of teaching, talking about all the things from science to his opinions about the world war. Invariably, this influences children's perception about events with the promise of taking them one step further towards the future of free India. In other words, interaction with Arvind evokes in Manju and Babu a revolutionary fervour. On the other hand, there is the college Principal, who conducts a talk in the college to 'pacify' the enraged youth. He goes on to remind the students that they are not supposed to be "agitators or revolutionaries" (51). For him such students are "traitors" who need to be exposed and arrested. Fortunately these college students are more enlightened than him and therefore possess the courage enough to retort to his disloyalty towards the national cause. Among the "revolutionaries" are Mohan and Suman who have taken a step ahead to shun their institution and its authoritarian ideology as Gandhi has requested them to.

Apart from school and college there are other institutions that work as ideological apparatuses are radio (oral word) and printing press (written word). Naturally, both these are again very powerful mediums since it is there in historical records that Congress had set up its own secret radio station to stay updated on the international happenings. Similarly, the printing press (newspapers, pamphlets, etc.) was established to propagate the national ideology among the masses. Needless to say that the British government in India gauged the threat both these institutions posed and consequently banned both. This historical detail is illustrated in *The Narayanpur Incident*. Whereas Dinkar Kaka's ". . . press has been closed down" because "He was going to publish the Mahatma's speech" (13), Mahadevappa's press has been burnt. In a similar way, all the private schools have been shut down with the fear that they might ". . . have been carrying on subversive activities." (25). British have also confiscated all the important documents from the schools in order to extract the necessary information about national struggle that the papers might carry. To put an end to all anti-government activities, the British via Indian soldiers horrendously loot ". . . most of the houses, including Annu Kaka's" (135).

Just like these ideological apparatuses, ‘repressive state apparatuses’⁹ are also at play. These repressive institutions, like the police and the army, are present throughout the novel to exhibit their strength as against the national tide. Appa calls them “traitors” (11) since they partake of the British colonial policy, overthrowing and stabbing their own brothers and sisters. Except for Patil, the sub-Inspector, all the others in the police force have become thick skulled, have lost all compassion and empathy towards their own people, such that they can “. . . rain blows on the boy lying on the ground” (21), hit a girl “. . . so hard, that her arm is broken” (26), “. . . they have beaten up boys and girls” (53) who were participating in the public meeting, and so on. Police-patil is an example of how those in the police force play deceitful tricks on the innocent people of their own country (in this case, Bhima). The reaction of the Indian nationalists is again on dual lines, those on the path of non-violence (like Appa) simply let the police do their duty, do not confront them, do not retort. Appa, while at a public meeting, directs his fellow nationalists by saying “Don’t fight back. Don’t resist.” (31). Radicals like Mohan, Arvind, Sadanand, on the other hand, loot the Treasury (where all the government money was kept) and set the police station and the dak bungalow (DSP’s residence) on fire along with the railway tracks and post offices. For them, this move is way better than settling down “tamely in jail” (16). The ‘us versus them’ binary much visible in the resolution of these youngsters who will not “. . . let them beat us, knock us about, push us around, make us crawl in our own country!” (26). Arvind also suggests to the people of Narayanpur that it is high time that they refuse to pay the collective fine of Rs. 7000 to the British government, that it is time to show solidarity as much as retaliation. Part of promoting this national ideology is demonstrated by wearing “Gandhi caps” (123). When the children firmly plant one of the Gandhi caps on the Sannur police-patil’s head, it is symbolic of people strongly letting go off their fear of the authority manifested in the police uniform. However, what follows is an example of utmost brutality/ atrocities that had become a trademark of colonial rule during the early 20th century India. This was the adopted British strategy to suppress the burgeoning revolution. British colonial policy could not restrain its repressive structures despite Gandhi’s firm assertion that “Repression can only breed discontent and bitterness.”¹⁰

The usage of violence in children’s books is another relevant point here. This is considered an unusual topic for children’s books for it leads children to believe that the world, which is dominated by hatred and cruelty, is a pessimistic and gloomy place to be in. However, violence in children’s books is in no way recent phenomena, it dates back to the fairy tales, folk tales, where violence (in the form of punishment) was a way to transform lives. The view is that by omitting violence, the world which is wrought with violence is manipulated into something which it is not. Similarly, in a scenario like national ‘struggle’ for freedom, violence becomes an indispensable part of the novel. There are gruesome scenes like there is Babu “. . . with two big gashes on his head”, “One little girl” has “been trampled to death” (127), Bhima has been shot dead, then there are indefinite incidents of buildings and railway tracks burning, mention of revolvers/ guns in everyday life, police thrashing up students/ men/ women, and so on. On top of that, there is a mention of World War innumerable times, with the inherent fear that Nazism and Fascism might overtake the world. So the world of this novel, at least, is a world transformed into a battleground where there are relentless acts of violence which could in no way have been omitted.

⁹ See *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (1971). By this Althusser refers to the institutions which work not in an implicit manner like schools and families, but in quite an explicit manner in getting people to obey by force. These institutions exhibit direct control by resorting to physical violence.

¹⁰ See Gandhi to (Home) Secretary, Government of India on 23 September, 1943. Quoted in Bakshi 219.

That India was dragged into the war without her consent also finds a mention in the novel. Congressmen have been able to judge that situation, such that the boys find their master telling him that “It’s not even our war . . . We were not asked, were we, whether we wanted to be part of it? We were just dragged into it.” (8). Later on, even Mohan mentions the fact of British fighting the Germans in Europe. Babu and Manju discuss with Arvind the War and the plight of the world because of that. Since India’s history was inevitably linked to the world history, at this juncture due to the World War, British grip on India could not be loosened that easily. In his *Autobiography* (1962), Jawaharlal Nehru stated that “. . . the problem of India was tied up with other world problems.” (qtd in Bakshi 233). These other problems were Fascism and Nazism and in turn, militarism/ imperialism. He asserted that if the world had to be a better place, these three had to go because these were essentially interlinked. British were unwilling to give up their colonies because the colonies were a source of infinite manpower for the World War. However this was done by force. On the other hand, Congress leaders, like Gandhi, Nehru and others, made numerous offers to British that if they let go of India as their colony and let her restore freedom, India would let go of her hostility and become allies and supporters of the British side instead, to protect the interests of other nations. This is because as Gandhi put it “. . . Congress is anxious for Great Britain to avoid the fate that has overtaken other imperial powers. . .” and therefore the commonsensical decision would be that Britain sheds “. . . imperialism voluntarily by declaring India independent.” (qtd in Bakshi 216). Following this was the explanation of Congress’ aim in initiating the mass disobedience movement, which was that Congress wished to kill the disease of imperialism at its roots (so that India is not invaded by Japanese after the War), not just for the betterment of India, but for humanity as a whole. Once the British government refused to comply, there was no looking back and thus was initiated the civil disobedience movement with the slogan ‘Quit India’. *The Narayanpur Incident* is contextualized somewhere between the above mentioned two points. It begins with the movement and ends with the national tide leading to independence.

Since children’s books, Perry Nodelman believes, are all about “optimistic view of reality” (229), *The Nayanpur Incident* too proffers a happy ending to the readers. Although technically the novel ends with nothing except hope for the future independence, the “Epilogue” is used to provide a sense of closure. It becomes a happy ending since every issue potentially raised in the novel is conveniently sorted out, with India achieving the much coveted independence on 15 August 1947, Mohan “. . . was only too happy to come home . . . did his M.A. and went to become a journalist” (139); “Annu Kaka was released after a trial . . .” (139); “Manju abandoned all ideas of becoming a Rani of Jhansi, and became a doctor instead” (139); Shanti became a good poet, and so on. Since hope that leads to a child’s growth and change is essential to a story for children, it is all just too visible in the above mentioned instances. The child protagonists learn their lesson well, which is symptomatic of India’s bright future.

However, this supposedly happy ending has its own limitations. First in an attempt to haphazardly reach to a happy ending, a lot of other relevant historical details get omitted. While this in no way means to challenge Deshpande’s portrayal of ‘Quit India Movement’, it is also significant to look through the claims made in the ‘Introduction’ to *The Narayanpur Incident* about the it being realistic enough. There is a constant danger of passing incomplete information onto the child readers. The novel, then, raises more questions than it answers. What is one supposed to make of the absence of women from the lower classes? Why is there an a silence vis-à-vis regional and caste difference? Since the movement would not have been possible without the contribution of the masses, which included Sikhs and Muslims as much

as Hindus, why does the novel portray and celebrate the contribution only by the dominant and powerful Hindu families?

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