

P.V. Jaganmohan's The Great Indian Inferno (2009): A Critical Assessment

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ABSTRACT :

Literature, history and culture are closely related to each other directly or indirectly. Creative writers have always turned to historical facts and events for subject materials and have turned them into creative productions to present and preserve their cultural heritage. From Chaucer to the present, almost all literary giants have made use of their literary works to record the culture of their country. Indian literary giants are no exceptions. P.V. Jaganmohan, a trilingual Indian writer, has also used historical events from the pages of Indian history to produce his debut novel *The Great Indian Inferno* (2009) which goes a long way to record and preserve the precious secular cultural setup of our country. It is constructed around a political imbroglio – the Babri Masjid - Ram Janam Bhoomi. The historical issue provides the novelist with an opportunity to present his views on cultural harmony, nationalism, secularism, terrorism, family planning, welfare issues of the people of the country, corruption in politics, judiciary and public administration, etc which preserve the national cultural heritage of which all the people of the country feel proud.

KEYWORDS: cultural heritage, history, inferno, politics, communalism, terrorism, bureaucracy

Literature of a country is a record of its historical events and cultural ethos. It plays an important role in perpetuating and preserving the cultural heritage of a nation. Creative writers, since time immemorial, have always imaginatively used historical events of their nations to record and preserve social, political and cultural milieu in various forms of literature, particularly in fictions and dramas. Indian writers, such as Raja Rao and Salman Rushdie, Girish Karnard, Kiran Desai, etc are among the notable users of history in their creative works to record, reflect and preserve the Indian sensibility and culture.. In recent years, P.V. Jaganmohan, a trilingual (Tamil, Hindi and English) writer in Indian Writing in English, is one such author who has employed history in his fictional work to counter the attack on the very fabric of Indian cultural ethos and communal harmony.

P.V. Jaganmohan's *The Great Indian Inferno* (2009) is solely based on the historical event of the Babri Masjid - Ram Janam Bhoomi issue which rocked the Indian politics, social life, and overall secular national structure of the country. The event of the early 1990s in UP (Faizabad/Ayodhya) widened the cultural gap of two largest communities of the country. The cultural void created by the event greatly influenced the social and political climate and eclipsed the secular structure of the nation. The employment and treatment of this historical incident in the novel is very real, subtle, secular and effective which provides the novelist with the opportunity to present his views about his nationalism, secularism, multiculturalism and communal harmony. The novel very persuasively focuses on the issues which are very essential to understand the secular and social milieu and also to preserve and perpetuate the cultural ethos of the country.

The novel is set against the Babri Masjid-Ram Janam Bhoomi event which can be rightly considered a major event of the 20th century Indian socio-political history, next only to Indo-Pak partition. It blends with admirable dexterity the real incident with the fictionalized story of Jahan Shah's efforts, as an administrator, to bring about changes in the people's thinking and attitude with regard to social and communal harmony and tolerance, education, fundamentalism and modern thinking. The novel also

presents before us the efficiency and efficacy in developing social and communal harmony of NGOs and government systems.

The story moves around Jahan Shah's duty as IPS officer at various places beginning with his student life at Jawaharlal Nehru University where he comes in contact with Parvati. Both of them participate in the student's election campaign, supporting Emma as their leader. After one year in JNU, they become close friends because of their progressive minds. Despite their conservative families, they get closer and closer everyday during JNU life. Jahan Shah opts for IPS which he qualifies and after getting through the final interview, he goes to Mussoorie Academy for the first round of training. Parvati keeps visiting him on Sundays providing emotional and intellectual assistance.

The Police Academy provides the training course on Indian Penal Code, Criminal Procedure Code and Indian Evidence Act. Besides these training courses, he participates in extra-curricular activities. After that he goes to National Police Academy, Hyderabad for the second round of training. He is appointed as assistant SSP Moradabad where he played a vital role in averting communal rights during Muslim festival of Idd. Thereafter he goes to Meerut to complete the final training before getting full-fledged appointment as Dy SP officer. In the final phase he is appointed as SP of Faizabad during 1992. In Ayodhya-Faizabad he met with an unexpected and uncontrollable situation to avoid communal tension of Babri Masjid demolition incident. Despite his best efforts he fails to control the situation within administrative framework. The pressure from the state government and his accident injuries resulting from Amanatullah bomb explosion incident leaves him bed ridden during the critical period of demolition. The incident is, however, relayed to him through wireless. What he finds to his astonishment is that while the mosque is being demolished, the government machinery and administrators remain simply the mute spectators, even though the central government order is to maintain the status quo at the disputed site. The helpless and hopeless Jahan also remains the mute and upset spectator watching the dance of frenzy in 'inferno.' His confidential reports and all-out efforts go waste like music to deaf years or rain in the sea. He resigns from the post after the incidence and decides to join NGO like Nurbano to create awareness among the people of the country against illiteracy, fanaticism, exploitation and corruption and also to educate them to have scientific temper. He is now free to do all these social services remaining outside the government system which has certainly failed him. As a true Indian, he would not be under any political, religious or government pressure to do anything for the people in the country. He thinks that if he is not able to do something for the country remaining within the government systems, he can still do it from outside where there would be no social, political and religious pressures to work for the nation.

The novelist has very effectively portrayed the characters in the novel chiefly because he relies for his central issues and themes in the novel on the dialogues given to various characters. Almost all the themes and issues in the novel are presented through the dialogues rather than through the action. For this purpose he creates two sets of characters – the ones which speak the mind of the novelist – Jahan Shah, Parvati, Hema, Asha, Andrews and Nurbano are the ones whom the novelist uses as his own mouthpiece; Amanatullah and some unnamed characters, such as the students of All India Muslim youth Forum, karsewaks, some unknown politicians, etc are another set of characters serving as a contrast to the former type. The issues of religion (fanaticism and fundamentalism), secularism, terrorism, functioning of NGOs, married love and inter-caste marriages, women's issues, progressive thinking and modernism, communal violence, shameful politics, judicial corruptions, social issues like family planning, administrative issues like law and order situations, etc are debated and discussed through these two sets of characters. These sets of characters serve as comparison and contrast with respect to the above-mentioned issues. The comparative and contrastive analyses of these two sets of characters reveal the novelist's mind and ideologies vis-à-vis these issues.

Jahan Shah and Parvati, both belonging to different communities, have many things in common – intellectual make-up, concerns for the welfare of the people and of the country; being JNU students, both of them are progressive and modern. These attributes bring them closer to each other from the JNU days. Their matrimonial tie-up does not indeed startle anyone, even though both of them are from different religions. Their parents and friends are, surprisingly enough, not surprised too. It seems a bit unconvincing, or at least, acceptable with some difficulty in UP state in which people are usually are

communal from this perspective. Nevertheless, the novelist does not give much substance to such issues as far as their matrimonial issue is concerned. The case with Asha-Andrews, Ayesha-Ganesh and Alam Shah-Maria are no different. The novelist has indeed deliberately presented the inter-cast or inter-religious marriages because he thinks that the country's secular and impartial society can only be developed if such marriages are allowed and promoted, failing which the country would turn into "inferno". Their parents, being intellectual and tolerant themselves, happily allow such things to happen. The inter-religious marriages, from some Hindu/Muslim fundamentalist's perspectives, are frowned upon, or may be allowed on certain conditions to be fulfilled beforehand. For instance, in Muslim family, a Muslim girl can marry only Muslim boys. But if the non-Muslim converts into Muslim, then one can go for it. The case would be similar in other religious communities as well. But the novelist deliberately goes for the registered marriages of their characters, or marriages in front of only a chosen few, probably to avoid any such disturbances arising out of this situation.

The novelist gives larger space for discussing family planning matters. All the major characters are almost obsessed with this idea – family planning to contain the population of the country failing which the nation would go into "inferno" again. The character Nurbano is left matchless lady so that she can run NGO without any disturbance. Jahan-Parvati is also obsessed with only one child family; Asha-Andrews too have only one child; Ganesh is the lone child of a retired professor. Parvati is the only daughter of their parents; Nurbano is perhaps is the only daughter of her widowed mother; she would not even be married after the treachery of Amanatullah. Despite being a larger family with two brothers and a sister, Jahan's parents have been able to educate them in respectable ways – Jahan becomes an IPS Officer; Alam is an Inter College teacher, and their sister Ayesha becomes a doctor; so Jahan's family is exception. It seems, nevertheless, that the novelist is obsessed with the idea of family planning for containing one's family and reducing the population so that the children can have proper food and better education. Then the country would be saved from entering into inferno.

Another set of characters are anti-national, terrorists who are indulged in "Crush India" mission. Amanatullah is presented as a contrast to Jahan Shah; the former is a fundamentalist from the JNU days itself. His fundamental or fanatic bend of mind leads towards terrorism in the name of jihad. He involves himself in terrorist activities killing Hema; while attempting to kill his JNU friend Jahan, he is killed. The novelist brings the bad or extremely negative picture of religious fanaticism, fundamentalism, etc. He also gives the picture of Hindu fundamentalism – though of different type. The Hindu fanatics, karsewaks, indulged in anti-national, anti-secular, highly communal activity of demolition, which fans the communal violence throughout the country, are exposed in the novel. The politicians and government, both State and Central, too are indulged in anti-national and communal activities despite being the upholder of the constitution of the country. They all are responsible for pushing the country into the "inferno". The novelist is clear about the roles of the common public, politicians and the governments. In the send off cum felicitation party given to Jahan Shah by the people of Sambhal for his outstanding, impartial and responsible job as a government official to maintain the law and order problems and also to remove the crime perpetrated unabated for years by road robbers, etc the novelist makes Jahan speak about the four pillars of democracy in which Executive, Legislators, Judiciary and Press have been given roles and duties. They deviance from their assigned responsibilities results in the failure of democracy. It will result into the kind of life, governance, etc no better than that in inferno. The novelist has adequately shown the wrongs in all these fields which have pushed the country into inferno. Thus the novelist through various characters indicates that the country has been moved into "inferno."

The novel discusses and debates a number of issues related to life, politics, religion, love and marriage, overpopulation, Judicial system in the country, corruption, violence and communal disharmony in the country, vote-bank politics, etc. It is certainly set against the most sensitive event of the last decade of the 20th century – Babri Masjid-Ram Mandir imbroglio. The issue has not, in my knowledge, been touched by any novelist directly. The issue of Muslim-Hindu communal riots which have played havoc in several states after the Ayodhya imbroglio sends a chill down the spine to anybody who thinks to write about it. All these issues are related, in some way or the other, to the story of Jahan's development as a responsible, sincere, and impartial IPS officer who is always eager and prompt to uphold law and order and the constitutional values. The central character of the novel, Jahan, with his progressive and modern

intellectual make-up, tries to assess, redefine, and persuades the general public to various issues in the light of Indian cultural, economic, and social scenario. He constantly endeavours to save India and its people from being engulfed by inferno caused by communal disharmony, violence and corruption prevalent in the country for which politicians, knowingly or unknowingly, are responsible. He overcomes all the difficulties that come in his way to uphold the law and order situations in Moradabad, Meerut and Faizabad. The eve-teasing incident in Sambhal, waylaying and roadside robbery in Sambhal-Moradabad road, intense Idd preparation in Moradabad to avoid any communal violence especially during the Ramzan month, communal violence during another Ramzan month in Meerut, etc are all handled by Jahan with great strategic and heroic acumen. The successful handling of these issues earns him a greater responsibility of the services of SP City of Faizabad-Ayodhya. He tries his best to bring the Babri Masjid- Ram Mandir issue under control. But the very government of the State and Centre do not provide him the assurance, nor do they remain serious to handle the issue promptly and meticulously. These governments, according to the novelist, are themselves responsible for the things that happen at its time. Jahan is here again successful in letting the governments know the latest developments, and he writes as many reports as nine reports, but the things go out of control particularly owing to their negligence. They do not pay any heed to Jahan's suggestions. The mob mentality soon takes over, and the central and state security arrangements remain a mere observance to see the drama of demolition. For Jahan, it is not a question of the demolition of the historical mosque, but it is the very upholding of secular and impartial values of the constitution of the world's second largest democratic country. Even though he is attacked by a terrorist group, Jahan takes the challenge positively and prepares the government machinery accordingly. He stakes his life for the sake of the nation, but he does not allow the terrorists to visit the disputed site.

The novelist has tried to show that the politicians are governed by caste-based or community-based issues rather than the issue of country's development or people's welfare. This is largely responsible for the communal violence in the country. The issue is ignited and sparked intensely also due to the ignorance, illiteracy or traditional thinking of the people of the country. Such politics thrives on this condition. The politicians have always used this trick to their vote-bank policy, etc. In this novel too, Jahan is able to control the communal violence of the sensitive places like Moradabad, Sambhal and Meerut because he handles the situation directly, and without the interference of the politicians. He remains impartial, strict, and sincere in his endeavour to control the violence. But he cannot do so in the issue of Babri Masjid chiefly because of the influence as well as the direct interference of the politicians. Jahan sincerely believes that he can control the situation. But he senses the political interference quite early. Whatever arrangements are made either by the state or the central command, though adequate, but Jahan's suggestion is never paid heed to. Consequently, the situation goes out the control. The government machinery remains mere machinery, and Jahan the mute spectator of the drama of the fateful event of demolition.

The issues of communal violence or riots, as the novelist believes, are also triggered by cross-border terrorism; some type of terrorism is also run and supported by some political parties in the country; if the people are educated them from the perspectives of secularism, then they can live together with harmony and brotherhood. They can make contribution to the nation's development and then they would not allow the communal politics to flourish and succeed in the country.

As for the cross-border terrorism, the communal and fundamental Muslims fall easy prey to them. The terrorists trying to blow Nauchandi express at Meerut are arrested. They try to create disturbances in the city and fuel the communal violence. The Madarassas and other religious schools are their soft targets:

Moradabad had become a very very sensitive place and a breeding ground for both ...Hindu and Muslim fundamentalists. Almost all Muslim Bodies are operating from here. Madarassas here are getting funds from all Muslim countries. RSS, the Hindu organizations, believing in the Hindu State is also very active here. Among many Madarassas few are good, teaching properly but a few have become shelters for ISI agents and these schools indulge in anti-national activities..." (118)

The novel provides ample instances of crimes and corruptions flourishing in the country. Sambhal incidence, road robbery in Moradabad, crimes in Meerut, sponsored crime in Faizabad – veneration of the disputed site by the Chief Minister, watching mutely by the administrative officers is also crime. Giving

bail to the terrorist by the district judge on account of the lack of evidence and then the release from the court of the ISI agents by bribing the judicial magistrate,

The novel touches upon several social issues prevailing in the country which hinder the growth of the social and developmental climate of the country – problems in inter-caste marriages, family planning, modern thinking, secular attitude, education to counter fundamentalism, fanaticism, etc. The possibility and success of inter-caste marriages – its advantages and limitations in the communal environment of the country are all touched upon very effectively. The several inter-caste marriages in the novel prove the secular nature of our constitution and such practices must be promoted in order to save the country from being pushed into inferno. The novelist is also critical about the capacity and potential of the government to bring about any amelioration with regard to these issues, and he valorizes and supports the NGOs doing all-out efforts in this direction. The hero of the novel Jahan Shah also at the end adopts the same line of action after resigning the high profile government administrative post.

The novel effectively presents the corruption in the judicial system of the country which only adds to the problem of the people and the country. During the send off cum felicitation party given by the people of Sambhal, Jahan Shah speaks: "...if judiciary behaves frenetically and steps out for even trivial issues sermonizing the world forgetting about its own liability of lakhs of pending cases all over the country and still wanting to enjoy summer vacations like English people and availing two-three leave travel concessions or shamelessly bailing out even hard core criminals for reasons known to all, they too deceive our country" (126). Next, the ISI agents trying to take advantage of Ayodhya issue are arrested by Jahan Shah but they get themselves bailed out by bribing the judges.

The novelist has also presented the social, religious, political and democratic conditions of the early 1990s in the country. The decade is characterized by communal climate, political instability and democratic upheavals. The caste-based, community-based political climate of the period caused a lot of turmoil in the form of riots and communal violence all over the country, and all the political parties, in some way or the other, were trying to form central government by playing upon caste, religion and regional issues in order to garner votes in election. At individual levels as well, the large number of people had been severely influenced by communal climate generated by various political parties. The religious predominance in Muslims and Hindus alike had turned fundamentalist or even fanatics to a greater extent. The religious tolerance was getting below every day. The terrorist activities in the country, probably also caused by agents across the border, with Kashmir issues in the centre, had made the social and common life of the people difficult and the whole nation has been pushed into the "inferno". The communal fire had made the infernal fire all the more inflammable. It is this background that the novelist has created the novel on and given the title of. He is right, to a greater extent, to call Indian life 'infernal' because he might have experienced the pangs and traumas of this life himself for which he does not hesitate to portray the communalized, political, social and democratic climate of the country.

The novelist has touched upon the issues which no one has hitherto touched simply because of the nature of the issue – Babri Masjid-Ram Janam Bhoomi imbroglio. He has courage to take up the issue in the most neutral and impartial way, though the story has been told in a rather traditional way with plot narrative blending the love story of Jahan-Parvati with socio-political issues. It is also true that he has shown many drawbacks as a novelist.

The novelist has portrayed the incidences and events, particularly related to terrorism, ISI network, not from the novelist's objective perspective, but he seems to have been partial in favour of government; the facts are not totally true. He describes it from a government administrative officer's point of view. Nevertheless, his creative dexterity can be discerned from the way in which he has fused Jahan's personal story (of married love, family life and his development as a responsible government IPS officer) with communal climate in the country due to which he ultimately resigns from his government services.

Jahan Shah as a lover is very well connected with his roles as a leader, as a friend, as an administrator; it reaches anti-climax when he fails as a powerful, sincere, impartial and intelligent Police Officer, during his confrontations with communal and biased politics of the real India. Though he is not to be blamed, but he takes it upon himself, of course as the sincere citizen of India, for the fiasco that takes place during the carnival of karsewaks in Babri Masjid demolition process. He remains a mute spectator of the incident, as he is unable to do anything, being physically as well as administratively under political

pressure or indifference of the State and Central Governments, to uphold the constitutional values by maintaining the status quo at the disputed site. He fails to hold the country being pushed into inferno. Though as an individual he does bring about certain changes in society and community.

The novelist relies more on the dialogues and conversations between the characters rather than involving them in the very plot or action in the novel. The issues are, therefore, weakly presented, having not borne out of the very plot. The redundancy in the narratives or incidents is also there – detailed historical descriptions of the Meerut city have no connection with the plot narrative. The novelist is not concerned with the technical aspect, but with providing the details as much as possible. He does not select the details as well. Mimesis is not there on the part of the novelist, as far as the plot development technique is concerned. Moreover, the novel contains quite a few shortcomings with regard to linguistic structures and typographical errors. The superfluous use of dictions, faulty sentence structures, figurative structures and even typographical errors has marred the novel's smooth narrative flow. It requires urgent revision on the part of the novelist.

The novel has been written on the Babri Masjid-Ram Janam Bhoomi imbroglio – an issue on which a lot of dirty politics have been done by various political parties; each political party have tried to cash the issue to the best of their guts and power. Both the pro-Muslim and pro-Hindu politicians have fought for several decades and ultimately the issue was finally closed in the closing years of first decade of the 21st century. The wise High Court decision on the issue accepted by the BMAC leaders as well virtually closed the chapter.

The novelist claims to have written the novel against the Babri Masjid-Ram Janam Bhoomi imbroglio, but the very issue comes only in the last few chapters. The narration does not make the story convincing. The main issue is presented as the culminating point or the climax – to bring the story to an end suddenly. If the novelist had used a little flashback or stream of consciousness technique to indicate the communal politics of the hypocritical Indian politicians, or if he had left the thread of the main issue in the beginning to be completed in the end along with Jahan Shah's story, probably the narrative would have been more convincing and effective.

Notwithstanding all these shortcomings, the novel is successful in presenting the issues of communalization, corruption, malfunctioning, irresponsibility and rashness in dispensation of justice by judiciary, terrorism, communal violence, along with some social issues like family planning, fundamentalism, etc. These issues are intricately woven into the narrative of Jahan Shah's personal story of married love, and his efforts as a government official to uphold and restore the cultural harmony, constitutional values and government orders in order to save the country from being slipped into "inferno". At the social and political levels, the responsible persons and authority have done adequately to push the country into "inferno" for which a lot of effort is required and the people on the whole need to be educated and trained for which, as Jahan believes, NGOs are doing better. That is why he joins NGO after resigning from the post of SP Faizabad City. The novelist believes it to be the only way out for the country to push out from inferno. It can now rightly be said that the novelist has certainly used the historical event to give vent to his creative urge in the form of this novel. The novelist, however, cannot be compared with Charles Dickens (*A Tale of Two Cities*), Raja Rao (*Kanthapura*) or even Walter Scott (*The Heart of Midlothian*) as far as the treatment of historical issue is concerned. He falls much below the standard presented by these novelists in their works. This is certainly a modest effort on the part of Jaganmohan to use history in the work of fiction to record and preserve the national cultural heritage which is characterized by harmony, peace, and brotherhood.