

Attending Manohar Malgonkar's Version Of Partition In *A Bend In The Ganges*

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Manohar Malgonkar, born into a Marathi-speaking Brahmin family in 1913 in Bombay and the grandson of a former Dewan of Indore, has first-hand experience of life in the princely states. Malgonkar earned a B.A. in English and Sanskrit(1935) from Bombay University, served for a decade in the army(rising to the rank of lieutenant-colonel), worked in a manganese mine as well as on a tea plantation, and is a hunting-guide turned conservationist. Conservative in outlook, he lost in parliamentary election. Malgonkar has published six novels- Distant Drum (1960), Combat of Shadows (1962), The Princess (1963), A Bend in the Ganges (1964), The Devil's Wind (1972), and Bandicoot Run (1982), three collections of short stories: A Toast in Warm Wine (1974), Rumble Tumble (1977), Four Graves and Other Stories (1990), three histories: Kanhoji Angrey: Maratha Admiral(1959; reissued in 1978 as The Sea Hawk: Life and Battles of Kanhoji Angrey), Puars of Dewas (1963), Chhatrapatis of Kolhapur (1971), three works of non-fiction: The Man Who Killed Gandhi(1978), Cue from the Inner Voice: The Choice before Big Business (1980), Inside Goa (1982) and a play: Line of Mars(1978). Open Seasons (1978), is excluded from the list of the novels because, to quote Malgonkar, "Open Season was not written as a novel, and it is being offered in that garb only because the film was never made."¹ The indelible impression of Manohar Malgonkar's novels is that of easy readability. As H.U. Khan observes: His novels and short stories mark a reaction against social realism and romanticism in their keynote. His novels and short stories are rooted in authenticity and sound historical sense. A Bend in the Ganges (1964) serves as an interesting illustration of his vision of human nature. As regards violence, Malgonkar views it as the essence of human nature. His novels depict outdoor life, action, adventure

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and violence. A major element that contributes to continuous external action, violence and adventure in his fiction is the theme of revenge. It is a recurrent feature of his novels and it ultimately acquires the status of a major motif in them. As a writer, he emphasizes the importance of plot and action because, he believes, fiction, above all, should entertain. His writing reflects his optimism and pragmatism, and is free of overt philosophical speculation. What is striking is Malgonkar's historical sense. His histories have the flavour of fiction, and his fiction has the verisimilitude of history. So he selected theme of partition for his politico historical novel *A Bend in the Ganges*.

Manohar Malgonkar, as a prominent Indo-English novelist and a good story teller, "raises the fundamental issue of the meaning of violence and non-violence." It is an exploration into the human context of non-violence, violence, disintegration and communal disharmony on an epic scale. Manohar Malgonkar regards the Partition as the outcome of the suppression of violence in Indian people by Mahatma Gandhi's creed of non-violence. He has depicted it from a political angle. Shakti Batra says that unlike Khushwant Singh, Malgonkar-...presents the political side of the Partition from the point of view of Gian, the ardent disciple of Gandhi and his creed of non-violence; Debidayal, the terrorist, and Hafiz Khan and Shafi Usman, the communalists. Malgonkar's account takes the form of a cool, impersonal debate among the characters; it looks like a scientific analysis of the situation rather than something which emerges out of the characters themselves and their convictions. This 'detachment' also marks his narration of the partition riots, when they are compared to similar descriptions by Khushwant Singh. It is in *A Bend in the Ganges* that Manohar Malgonkar uses violence, action and revenge articulating his vision of human nature and as an integral part of his technique. E.M. Forster considered *A Bend in the Ganges* as one of the three best novels of 1964. This novel was also aptly compared with such world-famous classics such as Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* by Richard Church in the review of the book *The Bookman*. Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* concentrates upon the painful drama of the partition comprehensively and suggestively. It shows convincingly how the 'terrorist movement'-a symbol of national solidarity-, designed to oust the British

from the Indian soil, degenerated in to communal hatred and violence, and how the emphasis from the struggle between Indian nationalism and British colonialism shifted unfortunately to the furious and malicious communal hatred between the Hindus and the Muslims, throwing into shade the basic Indian fight for freedom from the British rule. The double conflict that led to dual impacts of freedom and the division of the country, but before it happened, a hell was let loose in many provinces of the nation.

The novel depicts powerfully the horrible developments resulting in the partition, the triumph and tragedy of the hour of freedom, the screams of the victims rent the morning air, the dawn of freedom greeting the sub-continent in the pools of blood, the barbarous cruelties heaped on men and women, catcalls of the crowd and innumerable women being carried away naked, struggling and screaming at the top of their voice. The Muslim fears of being ruled by the Hindus in the absence of the British rule in the country where they had been the rulers, their notion that the Hindus were more dangerous than the foreigners and ought to be their real target and their subsequent striding at them, their struggle for a sage homeland separate from India leading to the Partition, and the terror and pity of it- all these form the contents of the novel. Indira Bhatt, in her article "Manohar Malgonkar as a Political Novelist", observes: The novel is, in fact, a testament of 'The tangle of feelings and relationship' against the background of the freedom movement and partition holocaust. The novel opens with the ceremonial burning of British garments. The cries of "Boycott British goods", "Bharat Mata ki jai" gave expression to the fire of freedom that was burning in the heart of the Indian masses. The ceremonial fire that raged in the market square was "just one of hundreds of thousands fires similar all over the country." Gandhiji himself appeared on the dais. He did not speak, it being Monday- his day of silence (mounvrata). Gian, a young student from the college, felt overwhelmed at the sight of the apostle of truth and non-violence. He was swayed away by the conviction that non-violence was not for the weak, that "the path of ahimsa is not for cowards..."⁸ He threw away his blazer- his most elegant garment made of imported English material- into the fire, and thus showed the zeal of a nationalist. Gian

Talwar comes from simple peasant stock. He is an opportunist and he adopts non-violence as a principle of expediency, not of faith. He is a student from Konshet with limited means surprisingly received an invitation for a picnic on the sands of the old river-bed at Birchi-bagh from one of the important boys at the college, Debi-dayal, the only son of Dewan-bahadur Tek Chand Kerwad, the elite of the town. He reached Kerwad House at the appointed hour, and was fascinated by Debi's sister. In the absence of Debi's father, Gian showed a desire to see the museum-a pride collection of bronzes. Sundari took Gian to the museum. Gian had a strange feeling there. For a moment he became "the statue, lifeless, ageless, unbreathing."⁹ As the spell broke, Gian found Sundari holding him by both the shoulders and her eyes staring with alarm. His announcement of becoming a follower of Gandhi was subjected to sharp criticism. Strangely, he was in the company of the terrorists headed by Singh-vis., Shafi Usman in disguise.

The revolutionaries criticized Gian for being a follower of Gandhi, but Gian took pride in having come under the influence of that hypnotic power because he fervently believed that only Gandhi could lead India to victory. Singh's agitated invitation to name any country that had shaken off foreign rule without resorting to war perturbed Gian but he declared in a sudden defiance that Gandhiji was a god. Singh cited examples of America. Turkey and Shivaji, and affirmed:

"...Freedom has to be won; it has to be won by sacrifice: by giving blood, not by giving up the good things of life and wearing white caps and going to jail. Look at America- the United States! They went to war. Turkey, even our own Shivaji. Non-violence is the philosophy of sheep, a creed for cowards. It is the greatest danger to this country.¹⁰

The picnic threw enough light on the two distinct ways in India's fight for freedom: the one of non-violence hated and reflected by the terrorists; and the other of revolution dreaded by Gandhi and his followers. As the events clearly showed, it needed superhuman discipline to follow the path of non-violence. Gian Talwar, who announced to follow ahimsa

even in the face of the strongest provocation, very soon, took to violence showing the hollowness of his defiant statements. Shafi-Usman, in the disguise of a Sikh, talked of fight against the British, but very soon this fight changed its target-his own Hindu associates and the Hindus in general became the object of his attack. The fervent advocate of shaking off foreign rule through violent ways degenerated into a narrow-minded communalist siding a particular community against the other, and eager to have blood bath.

The bloody battle between the two closely related families-the Big House and the Little House-has an important bearing on the theme of the novel. Vishnu Dutt was killed by the same Gian, who, a little earlier, had taken pride in proclaiming himself a true disciple of Mahatma Gandhi. The two houses in the small village were in an unwarranted struggle. All this was a pointer to the main acts of horror caused by the partition. As K.R.Srinivas Iyengar aptly observes in *Indian Writing in English*: Like a prologue to the main act, this story of family feud-suspicion, hatred, vindictiveness, murder-is to be viewed as the advance rivalry, micro-tragedy foreshadowing the macro tragedy on a national scale in the year of the partition. 11 The terrorist movement was very active in Duriabad. It was an integrated group of young men hailing from different communities and province, and all were united in the sacred cause of fight against the British rule. The members of the club were nationalists and fellow-terrorists. Shafi Usman, Alias Singh, with his battle cry 'a million shall die', was the leader of the club. His close associate was an outstanding figure, Debi-dayal. All young men despised the foreigners. As Malgonkar states: Debi hated the British, as they all hated the British: that was what brought them together, Hindus and Muslims and Sikhs, men of different religions united in the cause of freedom as blood-brothers; the Freedom Fighters.12 The 'Ram and Rahim Club' stressed the need and the survival of the national solidarity to oust the British from the Indian soil in the face of the hot wave of religious fanaticism that swept the country: "They were all fervent patriots, dedicated to the overthrow of British rule in India. Anyone who represented that rule, British or Indian, was their enemy; anything that represented that rule was their legitimate target. 'Jai-ram' answered by 'Jai-rahim' was their secret

mode of greeting. The name of Rama sacred to all Hindus, and that of Rahim equally sacred to the Muslims.”¹³

The Indian national scene of the time revealed signs of sharp religious differences between the Hindus and the Muslims. But this group under the secular leader, Shafi-Usman, remained unimpaired. The terrorist movement “was the last gasp of those who wanted to carry on the struggle united. They were all willing; almost eager to die for their motherland, and it needed a leader of Shafi’s calibre to keep them from making thoughtless sacrifices.”¹⁴ They knew exactly that the religious differences were the root cause of the country’s slavery and that the British played upon this weakness and continued to rule India by dividing the Indians into different communally antagonistic groups.

The emotional separation caused by the partition was one of the most unfortunate developments in the history of mankind. Such emotional separation will not be noticed either by politicians or the religious leaders but a great novelist like Manohar Malgonkar can depict such tragedy of human values in a fictional work like *A Bend in the Ganges*. The poor people had fallen a victim to the whims of the politicians. Communal hatred, suspicion, the fear to be ruled by the majority, and the careful propaganda not to be ruled by the people who once were slaves led the partition and brought about the mass movement of population. It brought untold misery to the millions of people for no fault of their own; their plight was simply horrible: Political expediency had suddenly transformed them into refugees fleeing from their own land as though it had been invaded by an enemy. They left behind everything they possessed; their lands, houses, cattle, their household goods. They also left behind scores of thousands of dead and dying, sacrificial offerings to freedom. They fled without caring for the weak or the lame who had fallen by the way side, unable to withstand the rigours of the migration.⁶⁰ Tired, hungry, thirsty and sleepy people traveled in the train. These people were on their way to Pakistan—the land that most of them had never seen, the land that promised relief to them and the place that cut them off “from their environments as effectively as by a surgical operation.”⁶¹ The brutal violence reminded Debi-dayal of the often repeated words of Shafi Usman, the terrorist leader: “A million shall die.”⁶² Independence was

only three days away, but the tide of violence, rape, abduction that swept the country destroyed thousands before the sun of freedom dawn upon the land. It puzzled as how the people, proclaiming brotherhood earlier had come to this state of affairs, and how the centuries- old ties of fraternity were suddenly, shattered leading to this upheaval. It was the failure of Gandhi and the success of the shrewdly propagated British policy of divide and rule. Manohar Malgonkar raises certain important questions about this unprecedented event leading to the mass massacre of people in the name of religion. He asks After living as brothers over so many generations, how had they suddenly been infected by such virulent hatred for each other? Who had won, Gandhi or the British? For the British at least had foreseen such a development. Or had they both lost through not having allowed for structural flaws in the human material they were dealing with? Had Gandhi ever envisaged a freedom that would be accompanied by so much suffering and release so much hatred ? Had he realized it might impose transfers of population unparalleled throughout history? 63

These thought-provoking problems show the hollowness of communal rage and frenzy. In India the Muslims were searched: "Gangs of hooligans went patrolling the streets, making house-to-house searches for the Muslims."⁶⁴ The whole land was torn to pieces as a result of gigantic convulsion. An unimaginable chaos had overwhelmed the country. The train services were seriously disrupted and paralyzed. All workers had run away for the safety of their lives. The movement of refugees was very slow. There was complete panic: All the Muslim railway servants had fled from posts as the Hindus had fled from their posts on the other side:

The station masters, signalmen, engine drivers, firemen ticket-punchers, clerks, guards, everyone had gone. The Hindu staff too had panicked and run away. ⁶⁵ Mumtaz and Debi had to camp out at the Kernal railway station in order to catch the train. It was an awful thing to catch the train; many perished in the attempt. The journey of Debi from Kernal to Pakistan presented the terrible sight of general massacre. There was scene after scene of carnage. The previous night a whole trainload

of refugees was massacred. The scene presented a gruesome sight; it was:- ...a scene of massacre, transformed by some trick of the morning light into a mirage. The large patches of red which had resembled saris left out to dry, shrank and shriveled and faded before their eyes, leaving only pools of dried blood. The vultures, the dogs and the jackals emerged, strutting disdainfully. 66 Debi was traveling in the guise of a Muslim. It was his Punjab, but it presented a deserted sight. There was complete devastation. The ownerless cattle wandered in the group looking for food:

The land of five rivers had become the land of carrion. The vultures and jackals and crows and rats wandered about, pecking, gnawing, tearing, gluttoned, staring boldly at their train. 67 The journey to Duriabad seemed to be an unending process. It showed the great change between the past and the present. The heart-rending sights continuously reminded Debi of Shafi's warning: "A million shall die!" 68 Debi-dayal always loved this native province, the Punjab in its entire mood. But this time it was in quite a different mood; it presented a scene of destruction on both the sides as though by "denuded swarms of locusts or by invading armies." 69 The train stopped for hours on a station without showing any sign of moving forward. The emptiness of the station and the silence deepened the atmosphere of horror. The brutal picking up of the people for killing was sad and scientific. Appearance was not to be trusted: "They made you take off your trousers to make sure that you were circumcised." 70 This was the unmistakable process of identification. Debi felt safe in the Indian territory, but things took a violent turn the moment he crossed border. It was now the dawn of the fifteenth of August-the dawn of freedom when the train came to a halt in Pakistan territory. In his heart Debi felt elated to greet the son of liberty that was his dream. But his blood congealed to see the cruel acts of impending violence. The Hindus, traveling in elaborate disguises with the Muslims, were found out and killed: Obviously, the novelist reveals a sound historical sense. The unfortunate facts of our national tragedy have been artistically painted. The horrible consequences of the partition are frankly stated. Millions of people became homeless, lost their belongings, felt victims to violence and insult, faced a new challenge and had to start all over again. This

was how “sunrise of our freedom” found millions mutilated, but cheered and insulted and tens of millions dispossessed of all that they had owned and cherished and brutally thrown away on the other side of the artificial border between India and Pakistan. Having viewed the results of communal violence in the novel we can agree with K.K.Sharma and B.K.Johri who state: Gandhi became ineffective and irrelevant. The moment the British grip on India loosened, the people of the country discarded non-violence and resorted to violent methods.⁷⁶ A Bend in the Ganges portrays, in a powerful way the freedom struggle of the Indian nationalists, the mad and misleading communal frenzy, the Japanese invasion of the British territories in Asia, the bitterness brought about by the Partition, the massive exchange of population and the cruel and shameful acts caused by communal hatred. The atmosphere of the country became vicious and hell was let loose. The novel dramatically depicts, in great detail, what is stated briefly in the “Author’s note”: What was achieved through non-violence, brought with it one of the bloodiest upheavals of history: twelve million people had to flee, leaving their homes; nearly half a million were killed; over a hundred thousand women, young and old, were abducted, raped, mutilated⁷⁷. Thus Malgonkar remains very objective in the delineation of his version of Partition. H.H.Williams sums up the achievement of Malgonkar in this novel by telling “there is an extraordinary objectivity in Malgonkar’s survey of the nationalist movement, the war and the partition.”⁷⁸

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