

## **Treatment of the World War II in Manohar Malgonkar's A Bend in the Ganges**

**Prof. Vikas Sharma\***

*\*Principal, D.A.V. (P.G.) College, Bulandshahr*

### **Abstract**

*The paper aims to take up the portrayal of World War II in Manohar Malgonkar's novel A Bend in the Ganges. The novel highlights the atrocities done by the British and the Japanese besides the depiction of the influence of the Second World War on the Indian scene. These aspects are taken as part of the critique in the paper.*

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### **Introduction**

In India, there was a mixed reaction to the World War II. The colonial India was forced to side with the British. The Indian soldiers went away to face and fight the Fascist menace. Even the leaders of the Freedom Movement, in spite of their earlier bitter experiences of the First World War, lent support to their masters. The unquestionable leader of the freedom struggle, Mahatma Gandhi sympathized with the Britishers and said "We do not seek independence out of Britain's ruin (Spear : 218)." However, it was in later stages that they realized the delicacy of the situation and embarked upon, a nation-wide movement, the 'Quit India Movement.' It started on August 8, 1942. Indians were placed on the horns of dilemma. The servile stood with the British Imperialism. The young enthusiasts sympathised and sided with the, what they felt and believed, liberating Japanese forces. A large number of Indians harboured friendly feelings for Japan because of Netaji Subash Chandra Bose. Percival Spear, judiciously, expresses this strangely divided India and states that the

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*"opinion was divided between democratic disapproval of Hitler and Nazism and nationalist suspicion of British and French imperialism. Left wing Congressmen who followed Nehru while critical of Germany were suspicious of Britain. The followers of Bose with his authoritarian leaning were inclined to wait with some expectancy. The country as a whole was far more detached in attitude than it had been in 1914."*  
(Spear : 214).

Marxism let Netaji to have contacts with the revolutionaries. He rejected the demand for Dominion status. The Congress pleaded for it on the strength of the Nehru-Report. Bose advocated forcefully for complete independence. He respected Gandhi but abhorred and condemned his ideology and the policy of compromise. His socialist views captured the attention and imagination of the younger section of the Congress. Bose caused annoyance in Gandhian circles by trying to stiffen the opposition of the Congress Party to any compromise with Britain. Bose wanted to exploit the Britain's peril to secure freedom. Gandhi and Nehru opposed the very idea of taking advantage of an imminent and inevitably Britain Germany conflict. Bose-Gandhi differences came to the fore and resulted in Bose's forming the Forward Block. Expelled from the Congress, Bose, who saws the British perfidy to the bones, finally and miraculously, escaped from India to lead an army against the British.

Japan entered the war in December 1941. Its excellent successes at Singapore in February 1942 and in Malaya and the then Burma, brought India within

the range of actual hostilities. Japan occupied Rangoon in March 1942. The Indians greeted these victories of Japan. They saw in them the victory for India and Netaji Subhash Chand Bose. The Congress set up organizations throughout out the country in order to serve the people against a possible Japanese invasion. Thus, India, like the rest of the world, was divided into two camps: Pro-Japan and Pro-British.

Manohar Malgonkar, in his '*A Bend in the Ganges*' refers to the incidents of World War II on the Indian soil. He shows the fear and enthusiasm of the people, the movements of the Japanese forces, the British resistance and the mood of the people of India during those troubled days. Malgonkar explains the British fear and precaution about the war affairs elaborately in describing the letters addressed to the prisoners in Andaman. The Irish Superintendent, Mulligan did not like prisoners reading the war news in their letters. Ghosh Babu, a Bengali head-clerk, in his instructions to Gian Talwar, life with obedience to the crown, makes it clear emphatically, "Hold back anything that says anything about war. Mulligan sahib is most strict about that (Malgonkar 1964:163)." The movement of the Indian armies to combat the menace of the World War is suggested by Sundari's letter to her brother Debi Dayal in Cellular Jail, Port Blair, and Andaman Islands. "Gopal's regiment has been mobilized and he is likely to be called upon soon (p.166)." Any letter referring to war invited serious objection from Mulligan Gian Talwar could not hand over Sundari's letter to Debi, for; it contained reference to war and Gopal, Sundari's husband, a military officer. Through the depiction of Gian's dilemma, Malgonkar shows the strictness imposed by the war. "He wished the letter had not contained the reference to someone joining a regiment and to the regiment being mobilized; for that would have to be cut out (p.166)." Mulligan objected to every mail that spoke of war and German victories. The Indian prisoners in the Andaman Island hailed German triumph. People, there, sided with the Germans. Mulligan, in his objection to the letters speaking of German victories, says to Gian:

*"No, we can't overlook that sort of thing, the way rumours spread in this place. Everyone seems to want the demand Germans to win so they'll be set free. You don't know what the Germans do with their prisoners. How they heard about the bombing of England. I can't imagine. ....Listening to them talk, you'd think the whole Royal Navy been sank. And now they know all about Dunkirk."(p.167)*

The statement of the Superintendent tells many an incident of the World War II. Germany's historic bombing of England, their major victories, the Indian joining the army. He finds "*Nothing wrong with that. I wish more Indians would, instead of damning the government.*" (p.167)

Malgonkar, in great detail, portrays the effect of war on prisoners on the island. The war told upon the living of the prisoners:

*"In the beginning, the war meant nothing to the convicts; it obtruded on their lives only in odd little ways: their lighting-up time was curtailed, their boiled rice and weevils in their chappaties-dark brown specks which looked like se-some seeds, tasted like sour mud and blistered their tongues.*

*The regular ships from India has stopped and there were no fresh chalans. Ships had to be diverted to tasks more important than transporting criminals to the Cellular jail. ... Now news of home came only in letters brought by itinerant shops, letters that were mutilated by an ever-tightening censorship."* (p.172)

Malgonkar shows the multi-dimensional changes brought about by the war in a vivid way. *"Spurned by the way itself, those outside its main current strove to prove their zeal (p.172)."* The law in the colony was enforced with unprecedented sternness. A determined attempt was made to show that despite reverses of the war, the British Empire was as enduring as the sun and the hills, the convicts, in the Cellular jail, saw and felt the impact of war clearly. Their working hours were stepped up, privileges cut down and punishment stiffened.

Malgonkar, through the convicts, show the psychology of the times. There appeared a slogan, inscribed in charcoal, on the wall of a Calvert. It read *"Hitler-Ko Jai Angrez Muradabad (p.175)."* The prison grape vine, suddenly, sprang to activity. It was rampant with rumours. The whispers of crushing defeats suffered by great armies, mass sinking of mighty ships, teeming cities flattened down by bombs raining from hundreds of aeroplanes, the proud countries overrun and subjugated by a world conqueror, Hitler – all these things pervaded the place.

*'A Bend in the Ganges'* shows the hopes and aspirations of many Indians rising with the news of repeated German conquests. The defeats of the Allies brought hope, wild and unreasoning that any day, the British would collapse and their empire fall. The atrocities perpetrated by the British would come to an end. Hitler, in the imagination of the people, became the savior. He assumed the form of *"some alien God, who had come to liberate the oppressed, an avatar of Vishnu (p.174)."* The novelist, however, does not show any partisanship to the Germans. He presents a dispassionate view of Indians towards the Great War. The learned and understanding did not share the views of the prisoners. Debi Dayal, emphatically states that *"I don't want the Germans, they are just as bad as the British (p.182)."* The English

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officers were never tired of praising their country and their might. They kept reiterating that *“The British army was immense, powerful, its resources inexhaustible; they had all the troops that were needed for the growing appetite of the war, to fight in Europe and Africa and the Arab countries and to spare.”* (p.189).

The hectic preparation to raise the camp for the battalions to move in on the island to fight the fast-marching Japanese forces throws light on the victories recorded by the Asian Country in the neighbourhood of India. The novel records the advances of Japan :

*“The enemy from a thousand miles away had sprung into action. Pearl Harbour was flattened. Indo-China, Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, crumbled like mud house in a monsoon flood and disappeared, leaving sad little heaps of unrecognizable debris and thick, oily bubbles on the surface.*

*The New Year came, and every day brought the enemy closer and closer.”* (pp. 199-200)

To the prisoners of the Cellular Jail the way things were shaping and the nearing Japanese forces offered the best chance of deliverance. The news of Japanese having captured Rangoon delighted them. The Rangoon Radio, in a special broadcast for the colony, promised deliverance to all the convicts and handing over of the British officials to the prisoners. The British made a plan to escape from and abandon the island with the tumultuous slogan *“Japan-Hind, bhai bhai* (p.205).” Malgonkar presents a vivid account of the Japanese activities on the island. Debi’s fear that the Japanese were, in no way, better than the British, came true. Anything bearing the truant of British occupation was ruthlessly eradicated. The Japanese officer felt proud of liberating the people of Malays and Burma from the British, of Indo-China from the French, and the Dutch Empire from the Dutch. He unfolded the plan of liberating India, Ceylon and Australia. He referred to Indians joining the India National Army.

The novel presents the picture of Rangoon after the Britishers’ unceremoniously quitting it. They left Rangoon, almost casually, like tenants vacating the house. Even in their hurriedly leaving Rangoon, they tried to destroy whatever they had labored to build. They did not care for the people they left behind. Through Debi Dayal, the protagonist, Malgonkar shows the disillusion with the Japanese. The Japanese did everything to humiliate the British. Debi found the Japanese uneasy companions : *“They were ruthless, overbearing and cruel far more cruel than*

*the British could ever be.....(p.260)*” The novelist gives a long list of the cruelties perpetrated upon the vanquished people by the Japanese. Debi finds it :

*Difficult to reconcile their flagrant disregard for the other prisoners in the Andamans, or for the unfortunate Burmese citizens here in Rangoon, with their scraping and bowing, their toothy smiles, their excessive courtesy. He had seen coolies mercilessly flogged for minor demeanors, by strutting, jack-booted soldiers; respectable men and women press-ganged into a sweeper corps to clean the city's streets; he had been horrified by the callousness, glee, almost, with which they bayoneted their prisoners, and had squirmed at the tortures they inflicted on any one they suspected of working against their interests (p. 260-261).”*

Describing the disastrous British engagements with the Japanese, Malgonkar remarks : *“Whatever they had come up against the Japanese, they had been routed. More often they had preferred to withdraw, without even offering the fight, so that even their staunch supporters had turned against them (p.261).”* The Indian soldiers under the Japanese took it to be great honour to fight side by side with them. They took the Japanese to be saviors. They expected them to liberate India. They were determined to destroy everyone that stood between them and Delhi. Delhi was their destination. They took it to be their duty to welcome as friends anyone who is out to destroy the British nation-the Germans, the Japanese. All patriots, they believed, must assist them, and fight on their side.

In a dispassionate analysis, Malgonkar peeps into the inhuman activities indulged in, both, by the Britishers and the Japanese. To his dismay, he finds little difference between the two. He observes that *“there was little to choose between two brands of conquerors, which were more repellent, the ugly blotches showing through the white or the flagrant yellow of the Japanese.” (p.265)*

The march of the vanquished refugees from Burma disgraced the British. The withdrawal and the most partisan British concern were far more callous and shocking than the massacre of Jallianwala. *“An arrogant, unbalanced, bitter man on the spot, ordering his machine gunners to mow down a mob was somehow less evil than were the authorities in Burma, where a government, its mask of respectability and self-righteousness torn away by a shattering military defeat, had been exposed as an ugly specter, making the starkest distinction between brown and white (p.265).”* The British saved only the white. The colour of the skin, suddenly, sprang to importance. The British did not mind others being slaughtered by the Japanese. White skin assumed the essential qualification for being evacuated.

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The act of discrimination was shocking. The British tradition of fairness received a great set back in their handling of the Burma evacuation. The White Burma government carried out an organized evacuation of the families of its officials leaving the Indians to feud for themselves. The Burmese hated the Indians more than they did the British. Panicked by the Burmese hooligans, they turned refugees and poured out of the country in thick swarms, choking the roads. Their plight was pathetic, “*On the way they died like flies; they were butchered by Burmese strong-arm men for their little trinkets, decimated by cholera, small pox, dysentery and malaria; their womenfolk were taken by anyone who fancied them (p.266).*” Hunger destroyed them.

Malgonkar shows the Japanese attack on the city of Bombay. A tene black cloud towered high over Malabar Hill. The docks had gone. It was devastation all round. The Bombay explosion was kept a tight secret. No one was supposed to know anything about it. “*The newspapers were forbidden to publish reports or pictures, even the casualty figures were a secret (p.282).*” It was, indeed, one of the greatest disasters of the war. The Empire looked ready to fall like a ripe mango into the hands of the waiting Japanese.

Malgonkar furnishes in detailed and absorbing account of the impact and incidents of the World War II on the Indian soil. He shows the cruelties perpetrated by the British tradition. The Japanese presence on the Indian soil through several countries of Asia received a mixed reaction from the Indians fighting for their freedom. Malgonkar peeps into the many facets of the war and, in a faithful study, explains the might of the Japanese and their occupation and subsequent plunder of the British possessions. The Japanese ambitious slogan of the march to Delhi and of humbling the British tyranny is beautifully emphasized upon. The story of the novel runs smoothly through the facts of history.

### **Reference**

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