
THE CONFLUENCE OF NON-VIOLENCE AND VIOLENCE: A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF MANOHAR MALGONKAR'S A BEND IN THE GANGES

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Abstract:

This paper delves into the intricate narrative of Manohar Malgonkar's A Bend in the Ganges, a novel set against the backdrop of India's struggle for independence and the harrowing partition that followed. The work explores the dichotomy between Gandhian non-violence and revolutionary violence, depicting the horrors of communal discord and the ideological battles that shaped the nation's history. Through a detailed examination of the main characters and the historical events they navigate, the paper highlights the complexities of identity, loyalty, and morality in times of national crisis. Malgonkar's narrative not only portrays the political and social upheavals but also emphasizes the resilience of the human spirit and the enduring power of love amidst chaos.

Keywords: Partition of India, Non-violence, Communal discord, Independence movement, Calamity.

Introduction:

Manohar Malgonkar stands as a prominent figure in Indian English literature, particularly noted for his contributions during the 1960s and 1970s. His novel *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) offers a poignant and critical examination of India's transition to independence, spotlighting the stark realities of communal violence and the partition. Set in a period of intense political and social turmoil, the novel juxtaposes the philosophies of Gandhian non-violence and the militant tactics of revolutionary groups. Through the lives of its protagonists—Gian Talwar, a follower of non-violence; Debi Dayal, a committed revolutionary; and Shafi Usman, a nationalist turned communalist—the narrative explores the moral and ethical dilemmas faced by individuals in a divided society. This paper seeks to analyse Malgonkar's portrayal of these characters and the broader socio-political context, elucidating how the novel serves as a critical commentary on the complex and often painful process of nation-building.

As a keen and detached observer of the Freedom Struggle, and as a candid, impartial critic of people and events, Manohar Malgonkar naturally chose to address the issues of non-violence and violence. *A Bend in the Ganges* portrays the evils that accompanied Independence, including the rise of communal discord and the partition of the country along religious lines. The differences between Hindus and Muslims became starkly apparent, leading to widespread violence when the British decided to leave India. Set against the background of India's

Independence movement, the novel illustrates the story of this discord between these two communities and the volcanic outbreak during the year of Independence. Mahatma Gandhi advocated for the practice of non-violence as a means to resolve communal and personal issues. This principle was successfully applied in the political arena, leading India to achieve independence. *A Bend in the Ganges* explores various questions surrounding Gandhi's ideology of non-violence and truth. Despite these questions, the novel ultimately affirms and celebrates the triumph of love over self-destructive violence. This emphasis is evident from what Malgonkar himself states in the Author's Note.

Only the violence in this story happens to be true;

it came in the wake of freedom to become a

part of India's history. Nothing else is drawn from life? (Malgonkar 6).

The main storyline revolves around three characters and their transformation during the partition of India and the events that followed. Gian Talwar, Debi Dayal, and Shafi Usman find their lives drastically altered as they confront the seeds of hatred sown by the British in the hearts of Indians before their departure. Gian, a college student, and ardent believer in non-violence, was inspired by Gandhi's teachings. In contrast, Debi and Shafi were members of the terrorist group "Freedom Fighters," believing that independence could only be achieved through violence. The "Hanuman Club," ostensibly formed for physical fitness, served as a front for terrorist activities. Many people felt that Gandhian non-violence would not lead the nation to freedom, believing instead that liberation could only come through sacrifice and bloodshed. These individuals advocated for a new religion of brotherhood, recognizing that religious differences among Indians were preventing the country from breaking free from the chains of colonialism. This movement, promoting terrorist activities, gained momentum in Duriabad, bringing together people from different castes, religions, communities, and regions to fight for the common cause of liberating their homeland from British rule.

The novel begins with the Civil Disobedience Movement of the early 1930s and ends with the partition riots in Punjab. Throughout the novel, one constant is the violence inflicted by humans in the name of religion and the suffering endured by others as a result of utter anarchy. It also incorporates a wide variety of sources of massacre and tolerance, such as the Swadeshi Movement, the activities of freedom fighters, the outbreak of the Second World War, the British retreat from Rangoon, the Bombay dock explosion, and the division of India. The episodes of violence themselves proved the veracity of the Mahatma Gandhi's fears, and eventually, he realized the ineffectiveness of non-violence. The theme of violence and its impact on the lives of common people, including men and women, is quite prominent in the novel. The canvas chosen by Malgonkar is quite vivid, where the action encompasses both domestic and national carnage. As Shyam M. Asnani says: "The novelist's purpose of describing this period seems to be two fold. The first is to introduce the reader, as an objective chronicler, the basic ingredient of the political scene, the violent and the non-violent, the injection of the communal virus, the parting of the ways, the Muslim outcry for division, the Hindu's answer, the Quit India phase and finally the removal of the shackles, climaxed by the creation of two separate states—India and Pakistan. The sole intention of the author is to probe

in the ideology of Ahimsa', nonviolence and truth offered by the Mahatma not only as political expediency, but also as a philosophy and way of life (Asnani 43).

Malgonkar vividly portrays the genuine rural landscape. He is also astute in his observation of human behaviour and adept at capturing shifting societal trends. The narrative unfolds at a brisk pace. The novel powerfully conveys the devastating consequences of Partition, the euphoria and heartbreak of independence, the anguished cries of victims echoing through the morning air, the dawn of freedom ushering in a blood-soaked era, the brutal atrocities inflicted upon men and women, the jeering taunts of the crowd, and countless women being dragged away naked, struggling and shrieking at the top of their lungs. The Muslims apprehensions about being governed by Hindus in the absence of British rule, their perception that Hindus posed a greater threat than foreigners and should be their primary target, and their subsequent aggression towards them, their quest for a secure homeland separate from India culminating in Partition, and the horror and pathos of it all – these form the essence of the novel.

Gian is studying in Duriabad, a town northwest of Punjab, where he meets Debidayal, the son of Dewan Bahadur Tekchand Kerwad, the owner of Kerwad Construction Company. Like Gian, Debidayal is a motivated young man, but he is a revolutionary and a member of a party called "The Freedom Fighters." Their leader is Shafi Usman, and together, these young patriots engage in various militant activities, such as blowing up bridges and removing fishplates from railway tracks. However, they find themselves in trouble when they smuggle explosives from Tekchand's factory and blow up an Air Force plane. During the planning and execution of this plan, Shafi comes under the influence of Hafiz, a fanatic Muslim who brainwashes Shafi into viewing all Hindus as enemies. After the plane incident, Shafi betrays his Hindu friends and manages to escape. Debidayal is arrested, convicted, and sent to the Andamans. Shafi's betrayal is shocking because he had previously been working hard for Hindu-Muslim-Sikh unity. Young people like Shafi and Debidayal were key to maintaining communal harmony. Shafi's betrayal is a significant blow to Debidayal, who is now serving a term in Andaman jail. It also highlights the growing communal consciousness in the country.

On the other hand, Gian, troubled by various family problems and feuds, struggles to adhere to his ideals of non-violence. He is consumed with a desire for revenge against Vishnu Dutt for the murder of his brother, Hari. Gian was deeply devoted to Hari, and his death was a devastating blow. After the death of Hari, Gian feels that non-violence is a weapon to struggle against the British. He is doubtful about its application to life itself. There are many passages in the novel which advocate the use of violence for self-defence and it is also a way of retaliation. Basu advocates violence by calling non-violence merely "a pious thought, a dream of the philosophers"(Malgonkar 290). In a fit of helpless rage, Gian kills Vishnu Dutt. Consequently, Gian is charged with murder and sent to the Andamans. Basu condemns the non-violence in the Indian character besides self-accusation. The use of non-violence for India is impossible, as India is surrounded by China and Pakistan; the hostile countries. Prof. G.S. Amur rightly observes that it is 'part of the novel's strategy to discredit non-violence and to demonstrate its effectiveness in the context of a life situation' and goes on to say that the value that the novel seeks to affirm is 'the value to love which transcends violence and non-violence'

(Amur104).

In prison, Gian and Debidayal cross paths once again. Debidayal's revolutionary fervour remains undiminished, while Gian becomes a turncoat. He acts as an "administrative spy," cooperating with Patrick Mulligan, the jailor, and reports against Debidayal. As a result, Debidayal is flogged mercilessly. Through cunning and treachery, Gian manages to escape from the jail and reaches mainland India. Debidayal collaborates with the Japanese, who had taken over the Andamans, and devises a plan to return to India under an assumed name to continue his militant activities. The Japanese escort him to Kohima, from where he joins the swarms of refugees and reaches Lahore. In Lahore, he encounters Shafi Usman and marries Shafi's girlfriend, Mumtaz, as an act of revenge, leaving Shafi powerless and broken. Gian continues his nefarious activities in Duriabad, making contact with Tekchand Kerwad and gaining the family's goodwill by claiming to be Debidayal's friend from the Andamans. He secures a job with the Kerwad Construction Company and also establishes a relationship with Sundari, Debidayal's sister. However, things take a dramatic turn for the worse. Debidayal and Mumtaz plan to reach Duriabad, but it is 1947, a time when riots are breaking out with unprecedented fury as the country approaches partition. The ensuing chaos and violence implicate everyone, creating a backdrop of widespread turmoil and tragedy. "Willy-nilly, everyone had come to be a participant in what was, in effect, a civil war" (Malgonkar 331-32). "Tens of millions of people had to flee, leaving everything behind; Muslims from India, Hindus and Sikhs from the land that was soon to become Pakistan: two great rivers of humanity flowing in opposite directions along the pitifully inadequate roads and railways, jamming, clashing, colliding head-on, leaving their dead and dying littering the landscape" (Malgonkar 332).

In the chaos, Debidayal is tragically killed by a mob. In Duriabad, Gian and Shafi have a deadly confrontation; Shafi kills Mrs. Tekchand, and Gian, in turn, kills Shafi. The pandemonium spirals out of control, with no one certain of what is happening. Ultimately, Gian manages to escape to India, but his conscience troubles him. Consumed by remorse, he changes his outlook and decides to return to Duriabad (now in Pakistan). There, he rescues Sundari and brings her to the safety and security of India.

The final chapter, titled "The Land They Were Leaving," carries a sense of nostalgia. The most heart-wrenching moment comes when old Mr. Tekchand is callously left behind as Sundari and Gian are ordered to continue by the traffic control officer, who coldly remarks, "We can't hold up the convoy for somebody's old man" (Malgonkar 382). This poignant line closes the novel.

Malgonkar scrutinizes the multifaceted causes of the partition and subsequent violence, including the entrenched Hindu-Muslim animosity, the ineffectiveness of non-violent resistance, and the flaws of Indian leadership. Through his narrative, Malgonkar probes the underlying factors that led to this historical calamity. Malgonkar's preoccupation with the theme of non-violence is evident in the epigraph attributed to Gandhi at the novel's outset, which poses a question that is gradually answered throughout the narrative. For an extraordinary individual like Mahatma Gandhi, adhering to non-violence amidst devastation and mortality was a formidable challenge, but for ordinary individuals like Gian, Basu, and countless others lacking the fortitude of moral conviction, it remained an unattainable ideal, a

mere platitude in the face of overwhelming adversity. The escalating communal tension between Hindus and Muslims fostered an atmosphere of mutual distrust, culminating in a deep-seated animosity.

The widening chasm between Hindus and Muslims precipitated a maelstrom of communal violence and discord, engulfing the country. Characters like Basu and other Gandhians lamented the dire unfolding of events, which ironically, were initially aimed against British colonial rule. As the sense of distrust and antipathy between Hindus and Muslims intensified and broadened, it ultimately culminated in the partition of India:

“The country is to be divided. That is what Jinnah wants: that is what the Muslim want. But before that division comes, every town, every village, is being torn apart. The Muslim’s don’t want freedom for India unless it means the carving out of a separate state for them. They insist that when the Congress ruled, just at the beginning of the war, they treated the Muslim, as a subordinate race” (Malgonkar 28). Malgonkar has masterfully recreated a historical atmosphere, seamlessly integrating pivotal events into the narrative fabric. The partition riots, which erupt towards the novel's climax, assume a life of their own, becoming the dominant force that shapes the destinies of the characters and the millions of victims caught in the maelstrom. The communal turmoil transforms into a dynamic, omnipotent entity, rendering Gian, Sundari, Debi Dayal, and others helpless, lifeless, and destitute.

The harrowing train journey of Debidayal and Mumtaz poignantly captures the mutual hatred, pervasive insecurity, and senseless destruction that characterized the era. The brutal assault on Avtar Singh, leader of the Sikh community in Duriabad, and his family by a marauding Muslim mob, accompanied by the haunting sounds of atrocities committed over the phone, serves as a chilling testament to the chaos. While the scenes are fictional, they possess the authenticity of historical documents. James Dayanand observes: “Malgonkar aptly describes *A Bend in the Ganges* as a felt experience which he skilfully transmutes into a riveting novel about the partition”. (Dayanand 22). R.S.Singh astutely dubs it an "epic of the Gandhian era"(Singh 132). Through his masterful storytelling, Malgonkar recreates the tumultuous era with unflinching accuracy, ensuring that the horrors of the past remain etched in our collective memory. Needless to say the idea of non-violence represented by protagonist Gian seems weak and wavering, appears as a lost cause whereas Debidayal who advocates violence changes his direction to non-violence. One agrees with Prof. Amur that the novel 'neither upholds non-violence nor endorses violence as a way of life.' (Amur 104). Meenakshi Mukherjee Observes: 'A Bend in the Ganges in panoramic is scope and epic in aspiration, crowded with events from modern Indian history, beginning with the Civil Disobedience Movement of the early thirties and ending in the post-partition riots in the Punjab' (Mukherjee 58). In *A Bend in the Ganges* Malgonkar is more interested in events and episodes for their new values and sensation rather than for their effect on men and women. It is not that the novel is totally devoid of human interest.

Malgonkar's attitude towards Gandhiji and his policies is similar to that of the novelists of Post Independence period in whom one finds a pluralistic approach and a questioning attitude which is not found in the novelists of the Pre-Independence days who took upon

themselves the burden of propagating the non-violent policies of Gandhi, as they believed in them implicitly. To this R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao are no exceptions. G.S. Amur very ably refutes the charge of sketchiness against *A Bend in the Ganges* by stating that it is unjust to the thoroughness with which Malgonkar explores the different areas of experiences presented in the novel: 'In spite of the wide canvas on which he has chosen to work the effect he creates is one of intensity and not of diffusion. This is as true of the rural tragedy, he presents in the early chapters of the novel as of the cataclysmic events of the partition which form the substance of the closing ones.' (Amur 118).

Conclusion:

In *A Bend in the Ganges*, Manohar Malgonkar masterfully depicts the tumultuous period of India's independence and partition, presenting a narrative rich with historical and emotional depth. The novel's exploration of non-violence and violence as competing ideologies offers a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding the partition of India. Through the experiences of Gian, Debi, and Shafi, Malgonkar reveals the deep fissures in Indian society, exacerbated by colonial rule and communal tensions. The characters' journeys reflect the broader struggles of a nation grappling with identity, unity, and the scars of partition. Despite the overwhelming violence and tragedy, the novel underscores the possibility of redemption and the enduring strength of love and humanity. As a literary work, *A Bend in the Ganges* not only captures the historical essence of its time but also provides a timeless reflection on the human condition amidst political and social upheaval. It remains a significant contribution to Indian English literature, offering insights into the moral and ethical challenges faced during one of the most critical periods in Indian history.

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