

Partition: A Hindu Response in Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges*

Jyotsna

Ph.D. Research Scholar,
Department of English,
Guru Kashi University, Talwandi Sabo,
District Bathinda, Punjab, India
jsingla69@gmail.com

Abstract

Malgonkar, has the personal experience of the partition which has been clearly pictured in his novel *A Bend in the Ganges*. There is an excellent presentation of bloody communal 'apportionment' which swept the whole country during this tragedy of partition. The breaking up of the old friends into enemies is the unfortunate outcome of the Partition. The brutal and sanguinary actions were more shocking than what the people had experienced in the war. The two communities had begun to behave like fierce animals, thirsty for the blood of their own fellow beings. The significance of the human values had been lost and the sights of burning, raping and killing were common. The whole atmosphere was charged with doubt and distrust prevailing everywhere. The two communities, Hindu and the Muslims were not ready to live together, hence had drifted poles apart and cried for a separate safe state. The Hindus never wanted that there should be an exclusive Muslim land. The British never wanted to leave the Hindus and the Muslims in harmony. So they played the heinous role of 'divide and rule'.

Keywords: Partition, Holocaust, Communal relations, Communal discord, Non-violence

A Bend in the Ganges (1964) Manohar Malgonkar's second novel on Partition, subscribes by and large to the general course of changes in the patterns of communal relations between the Hindus and Muslims. The period of 1946-1947 is considered to be the most crucial period in the history of modern India. *A Bend in the Ganges* depicts a vital aspect of that period which involves the relevance of violence and non-violence. Almost every book on Partition talks about the violence committed during this period. As Mosley in *The Last Days of the British Raj*, gives a ring-side view of the trauma leading to

independence and partition of India and writes: “In the nine months between August 1947 and the spring of the following year, between fourteen and sixteen million Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims were forced to leave their homes and flee to safety from blood- crazed mobs. In that same period over six lakh of them were killed.”

Malgonkar, has the personal experience of the partition which has been clearly pictured in his novel *A Bend in the Ganges*. There is an excellent presentation of bloody communal ‘apportionment’ which swept the whole country during this tragedy of partition. The breaking up of the old friends into enemies is the unfortunate outcome of the Partition. The brutal and sanguinary actions were more shocking than what the people had experienced in the war. The two communities had begun to behave like fierce animals, thirsty for the blood of their own fellow beings. The significance of the human values had been lost and the sights of burning, raping and killing were common. The whole atmosphere was charged with doubt and distrust prevailing everywhere. The two communities, Hindu and the Muslims were not ready to live together, hence had drifted poles apart and cried for a separate safe state. The Hindus never wanted that there should be an exclusive Muslim land. The British never wanted to leave the Hindus and the Muslims in harmony. So they played the heinous role of ‘*divide and rule*’.

Mukerjee describes this novel as: “A Bend in the Ganges is panoramic in 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 in Punjab.”

The story of the novel begins in 1930’s and extends up to the dawn of Independence in August, 1947, surrounding the history of a saga presenting the communal situation during the movement for Independence, the World War and the Partition of India. The life in towns of Punjab, the sylvan rolling fields in the hills, the savage and crude conditions at the cellular jail on the Island of Andamans, the jet-set life style of the rich in Bombay and the cataclysmic mob violence at the end- all these create not only “dramatic richness” and variety in the main plot but they also lend an “epic dimension” to the entire scene. Malgonkar owed the title of his novel from *The Ramayan*. Though the large scale violence during India’s partition in 1947 is narrated, the title very aptly signifies a very important turning point in the history of the nation. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar in his book, *Indian Writing in English*, refers to the line, given in *The Ramayan*, in connection with the title of Malgonkar’s *A Bend in the Ganges*: “At a bend in the Ganges they paused to take a look at the land they were leaving”.

The opening chapter of the novel presents the ceremonial burning of the foreign mill-made cloth under the impact of the Swadeshi Movement, foreshadowing the burning of Indian cities during Partition in the latter parts of the novel. The people of the village burn all their British clothes in order to oppose them. They say: “Let them come forward; bring their hats and coats and shirts and ties, to add fuel to this fire...Boycott British goods! That is the message.” Instead of the usual central character, Malgonkar introduces the device of the

double hero, chosen from two different layers society: Gian Talwar from “simple peasant stock” and Debi-dayal from a high trading class. There is a vital difference in their reactions towards the same national events, and it is this difference which provides the novel with its all- unifying pattern of contrast. Gian becomes a supporter of Gandhi’s creed of non-violence and his faith is genuinely felt although it breaks when put to severe test. Once, Gian along with Debi-dayal, his sister Sundari, Shafi Usman, the leader of the terrorist group, goes out on a picnic. The two distinct methods in Indian freedom struggle are shown at the picnic: the one of non-violence which is totally rejected and hated by Shafi and the other of violence that is opposed by Gandhi and his followers. Gian feels himself to be an outsider in his Gandhian dress and sacred thread. Shafi teases him by ridiculing the Gandhian creed of non- violence. He firmly believes that freedom can be won by sacrifices and by shedding blood.

Debi, on the other hand, commits himself to expel the British from India using violence. He deliberately cultivates the cult of violence as means to achieve this noble end. He joins a terrorist outfit known as the ‘Ram and Rahim Club’. The members of this club are all fervent patriots dedicated to the cause of freedom. “Jai Ram!” answered by “Jai Rahim!” is their secret mode of greeting.

The club emphasizes the need and the survival of the national integrity to chase away the British from the Indian soil .A picture of pre-Partition world of harmony and security is portrayed by the novelist, which is then shown to break down under the pressure of oppressive circumstances. The Hanuman Club, a facade for the Freedom Fighters, embodies this harmony in the novel, though it is at best an artificial accolade to a fast disappearing secular order.

Dissatisfied with Gandhian non- violence, the members of Hanuman Club, a revolutionary group advocate a new religion of brotherhood. They strongly believe that religious differences among the Indians, is the cause of their slavery. These young men, a group from different communities and provinces are united in the sacred cause against the British rule. The members of the club are nationalists and fellow-terrorists and their leader is Shafi Usman and his associate is Debi Dayal. To renounce vegetarianism and the taboos of religion they partake in the ceremony of eating a meal of beef and pork. The freedom fighters get over their religious barriers and become brothers in the service of their motherland. Their only aim is to attain freedom for their country from the tyrannical British regime: “We are all soldiers, soldiers in the army of liberation. Our aim is to free our motherland India, from the British, and we shall not rest till victory is won.”

But these sort of harmonious relationships between the two communities are fake. Different members of the Club have different reasons for their opposition to the British rule. The motive of Debi’s hatred for the British has nothing to do with the realm of politics and is purely accidental. At the age of thirteen, Debi was a witness to an attempted rape of his mother by a drunken British soldier. The fierce Debi jumps at the British soldier and kicks him like a puppy to saves his mother from disgrace. Burning with indiscriminate hatred he

vows to take revenge upon the British and even learns judo to train himself. He chooses the path of terrorism and is wholly committed to the cause of freedom. Similarly Shafi's militancy and his commitment to the cause of a violent ouster of the British is brought out by the fact of his father's death in the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and the humiliation inflicted by General Dyer's crawling order.

Gian's faith in non-violence is shaken as soon as he returns to his village, Konshet. Gian is involved in a family feud between the Little House and the Big House over the Piploda land. In this dispute, Hari, his elder brother is murdered by Vishnu Dutt. Gian could not muster courage to interfere and stop the fight. For some time, he tries to be a true follower of Mahatma Gandhi. He pays only lip-service to the principle of non-violence. When faced with reality his entire idealism evaporates and feels that non-violence is an impractical philosophy which cannot be followed in real life. The novelist presents the 'Ram and Rahim Club' as an embodiment of India during those days as a microcosm of the then persisting communal situation in the country. A noticeable change is seen in the relationships of different members of the Club, which are indicative of the changing patterns of communal relations between the two communities.

Hafiz Khan, who belongs to the selective coterie of the first batch of terrorists and the leader of the terrorist movement, advocates the two- nation theory and pleads for a separate state. A pattern of tense relations between the two communities is reflected. In the beginning, he fails to win over Shafi to his way of thinking which indicates the solidarity not only among different members of the Club but also between the two major communities of the country at that time. The terrorist movement- a symbol of national solidarity, which is organized and designed to overthrow the British from India, degenerates into communal hatred and violence caused by the Partition. Similarly the betrayal of Debi by Shafi at a later stage symbolizes the parting ways of the Congress and the Muslim League. Shafi does not pass on the pre warning of his arrest to Debi which leads to his arrest and subsequently he is transferred to the Cellular Jail in Andamans.

Complaining about the callousness of the Hindus towards the Muslims, Hafiz writes to Shafi that they should re-orientate their activities. Hafiz asks Shafi that he should concentrate his activities not against the British but against the Hindus since they are their real enemies. It shows that the Muslims consider Hindus and not the British as their enemies. Hafiz says: "Yes, a new nation. Not apart from India, but a part carved out of India that will be wholly Muslim, pure, uncontaminated."

The struggle for India's freedom began with the movement of the Hindus and the Muslims against the British. Under Shafi's leadership all the members of 'Hanuman Physical Culture Club' were united as a common hatred for the British and their desire to throw them out was a negative force which united them all. As the virus of communalism had not infected the movement, under Shafi's guidance they indulged in acts of sabotaging and burning down remote government buildings. They cut down telephone lines burnt wooden

sleepers on railway tracks and removed fish plates. Hundreds of motor cars were destroyed by them by “dropping fistfuls of sand into their oil tanks.” But the mutual distrust and hatred between the two communities changed the very hue of the struggle. The British got a breather and became the spectators of the internecine bitterness and struggle among the Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims themselves. They were divided on the communal lines and saw in the sunrise of Independence an opportunity to establish the supremacy of their own community. The Muslims dreamt of the emergence of an Islamic state while the Hindus foresaw the rule of their community in a democratic India. These differences of perceptions and aspirations divided the two communities into two camps who were ready for a pitched battle for the fulfillment of their goals. Thus instead of the pattern of communal amity, the pattern of communal discord stared at India. The novelist clearly portrays the political changes taking place in the country, revealing in the process the changing communal relations between the two communities from national solidarity to communal violence. The revolutionaries are convinced that in a struggle for freedom no country in the world has been able to fend off foreign rule without resorting to war and violence. Of the members of the ‘Ram and Rahim Club’ it is not only Shafi, who is influenced by the communal wave and joins the Muslim League, but also Basu, who swayed by the same wave joins the Hindu Mahasabha “to be aligned, in sheer self-defense of Hindus against Muslims.”

A visible change is noticed in Shafi who is now seen playing into the hands of Hafiz Khan, a terrorist turned fanatic. This sudden change in Shafi is symbolic of change in the behavior and thinking of a large segment of the Muslim community. Shafi, who at one time disguised as Singh and the leader of the terrorist group fights against British, soon changes his target and starts targeting his own Hindu friends and the Hindus in general. The very purpose of ousting the British from India is shattered and takes the form of communal frenzy. The Muslims begin to think Hindus as their enemies and not the British. Hafiz says: The Hindus have shown that Hindustan is for the Hindus. Now we Muslims have to look after ourselves. Organize ourselves before it is too late. Carve out our own country...A new country apart from India.”

Hafiz's above statement clearly reflects the mentality of the Muslim leaders and their impact on the orthodox Muslims. Contemptuously he blurts ill-will against the Hindus. Saying that the Hindu dominated independence is not acceptable.

Hafiz promotes the idea that Hindus consider themselves to be a superior race and once the British leave the country they will treat the Muslims as second-rate citizens. The Hindus will themselves enjoy an overwhelming majority. This further embittered their relations as the Muslims fear of displacement by the rising Hindu majority. Fully agreeing to Hafiz's earlier statements, Shafi now believes that Hindus have to be eliminated: “Now the fight was no longer against the British, but against the Hindus who were aspiring to rule over them. It was Jihad, a war sanctioned by religion, a sacred duty of every true believer.”

The harum-scarum speed with which the barbaric act of Partition was carried out with exiguous regard for an orderly transfer of population between the two countries led to a communal holocaust. The mutual mordancy between the Hindus and the Muslims led the freedom movement into backyard and the focus shifted to bloodbath and massacre of the members of both the communities. The tragic death of Dhan Singh, Tek Chand's chauffeur and his family, the mutilation of Basu's wife's face by an electric bulb filled with sulphuric acid shows as if India's face has been disfigured.

Tekchand, father of Debi, is also conscious of the Hindu-Muslim rivalry. He knows that the embittered relations between the two communities would never permit them to live in harmony. Like millions of other people he also feels that the presence of the British is necessary to keep the nation quiet and away from the horrors of the civil war. He knows that "In the chaos that would follow the withdrawal of British authority, Hindus and Muslims would be at each other's throat just as they had always been before the British came and established peace. Men like Churchill were not fools; the alternative to the British quitting India was civil war".

Though the scale is smaller yet the depicting the ordeal at a larger scale the novelist shows how having parted company, the Hindus and the Muslims indulged themselves in genocide. The description given here parallels the excruciating experiences of the migrants in Chaman Nahal's *Azadi*. Thus the novelist demonstrates the lowest water-mark of the communal relations between these two communities during Partition

The scenes of train-disasters during Partition are unfolded during Debi's journey to Duriabad along with his wife, Mumtaz. The freedom and partition brought misery and misfortunes to thousands of people on both the sides of the borders. The train in which they are travelling is packed with the uprooted men, women and children who are going to a country unknown to them:

Debi reflects when he watches the frightened and terror-stricken refugees huddling together in railway compartments clutching their meager possessions and staring vacantly. Is this the Independence which India wanted? Is this "the sunrise of our freedom?" Who is to blame? He searches for an answer. Debi, disguised as a Muslim under the assumed name, Karim Khan, feels rather safe in the Indian Territory. But as the train enters Pakistani territory on the dawn of the 15th of August, all the Hindus travelling along with Debi in elaborate disguises with the Muslims had to face the wrath of communal hatred. They were found out and killed while their women are taken away. Debi's disguise is also found out. He is stripped naked, blinded and killed. "A Hindu! ... A Kaffir!" Debi, who has given up violence long ago, falls a victim to the violence of a mob on the very day that brings freedom to the two countries.

The pattern of communal amity comes to forefront when Debi accepts Mumtaz as his wife since he does not hate the Muslim community as a whole and secular in his outlook. But it is buried deep in the ground with Mumtaz's second abduction by the Muslim ravishers who

in the blind rage of dishonouring the wife of a Hindu dishonor a co- religionist. This dramatic irony in the novel hits hard at ever widening gulf between the two communities at the time of Partition. The pattern of communal discord here runs deep as both the communities are waiting to pounce upon each other once the British leave the country. Thus Mumtaz's second abduction is a strong indictment of emerging pattern of communal discord.

A Bend in the Ganges portrays, in a powerful way the freedom struggle of the Indian nationalists, the mad and misleading communal frenzy and how the whole nation is engulfed by the insensate communal fury. The whole land is torn to pieces as a result of gigantic convulsion. The country is overwhelmed with an unimaginable chaos. The cruel acts of impending violence congealed the blood.

The pattern of communal violence does not end with Debi's death and like a nuclear fission it continues unabated. Shafi wants to snatch away Debi's sister Sundari to take revenge against Debi. He, therefore, raids the house of Debi's father Kerward bungalow with his gang. Debi's mother is killed in the scuffle that follows but Gian and Sundari kill Shafi with the statue of Shiva. The statue of Shiva provides the narrative with unity of symbolic pattern. It once stood in the prayer room of Gian's family home. Gian sells the statue to Kerwads who stops worshipping Vishnu. Accordingly Shiva's statue is employed as a weapon by Gian and Sundari against Shafi. Shiva is destroyer and is symbolic of the devastation and destruction during Partition.

Shafi's attack on Debi's house in Duriabad is not only an act of revenge but also a symbolic indication of the complete breakup of the 'Ram and Rahim Club' into warring factions. The dismemberment of this Club plays up the Partition of India and the hostility born out of it. Thus, the pattern of communal relations registers a change from the high point of harmony to the low point of utter chaos.

Duriabad has turned into a peculiar riot-torn town and the cries of human beings have become familiar sight for Tekchand and his family. Gian, Sundari and her father Tekchand Kerwad are forced to leave Duriabad, now a Pakistan territory and join the convoy to go to India. Gian and Sundari cross the border to India but Tekchand Kerwad disappears mysteriously leaving the convoy. The character on whom the Partition leaves its deepest psychological impact in the novel is Tekchand Kerwad. His family has lived in Duriabad for over a hundred years: They owned large tracts of land along the canals, They owned the Kerwad construction company And the Kerwad Housing Development, and God knows what else- even a street in the cantonment was named after them : Kerwad Avenue.

But the Partition of the country shatters him. He becomes a lost and broken man. Pondering over the turn the communal relations between the Hindus and the Muslims have taken, he feels shocked and agitated.

The gruesome events leave so indelible an imprint on his mind that he looks a "really bitten" man, his eyes with the "permanent frightened stare", the "slight trembling" of the head, the fingers "twitching nervously".

Tekchand Kerwad's utter despair at the events following Partition is similar to that of Lala Kanshi Ram in *Azadi*. Both men are owners of big business in Pakistan and cannot think of starting of at the same pedestal in the country across the border. The Independence and Partition seals their fate right when the years of toil have enabled them to reach the peak of their career. Theirs is not the time of labour but that of harvest. Like a farmer looking at rain-drenched ricks with despair, the two cannot even shed tears. Thus the breakdown of communal amity spells despair for people like Tekchand Kerwad and Lala Kanshi Ram.

Towards the end of the novel, through Debi, the novelist raises a question, "Who had won? Gandhi or the British?" and laments: "The land of the 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."

It is revealed that the fragile bond of communal harmony sustained by the negative force of a joint hatred by the British, disintegrates at the first sight of Independence which holds out different fortunes for different communities of India. The pattern of fragile communal concord between the Hindus and the Muslims tumbles with Partition to the point where the two communities are seized by a diabolical urge to kill indiscriminately. Thus Malgonkar remains very objective in the delineation of his version of Partition.

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