



Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend In The Ganges* As An Amalgamation Of Disparate Socio-Political Trends

Sanjeev Kumar Mishra

L. S. College, Muzaffarpur

Manohar Malgonkar is one of the most under-rated writers of English novel in India. Although he enjoys immense popularity with his readers whose number is by no means small, literary critics tend to dismiss him as a historical romancer, a writer of popular fiction whose works, being devoid of serious content, merely emphasize good story-telling. It is true that novels like *Spy in Amber* and *Shalimar* (which originated as a film script) were specifically written for the popular taste. And several of his short stories have a light-hearted banter giving the impression that the author was at pains to avoid anything as unsavoury as complexity or depth or intensity of feeling, in them. It is, thus, that G.S. Amur, while comparing Malgonkar with Raja Rao, states that the former "considers himself as essentially an entertainer, a story-teller and scrupulously keeps away from metaphysics".

A Bend in the Ganges (1964) was Malgonkar's fourth and most important novel which was compared with Tolstoy's *War and Peace* by Richard Church in his review of the novel in *The Bookman*. In his earlier novels, as in *A Bend*, one of the author's chief concerns is to depict the predicament of man in a world where values are changing too fast for his comprehension and adjustment. Man faces a crisis brought on by the breakdown of the old order and he feels no longer anchored to a safe tradition. In the resulting chaos some are destroyed, some flounder by the wayside and some survive on the strength of one or two lasting values which remain intact in the winds of change. Malgonkar's grasp of this eternal situation, a fact of life that puzzled the Greeks and all serious writers thereafter, at once places him at a level decidedly better than that of merely popular writers. *Distant Drums* by way of comparison is a saga of change, brought on by India's independence, in the formal and traditionbound life in the Indian army, stiffened by ages of hard discipline and archaic rituals (ceremonial sneezing in the officers' mess, the bagpiper marching on the gravel-path every morning to awaken the Commanding Officer). The new order is represented by the younger officers' hatred of the British, the jet set who go to the movies with notebook and pencil to learn new American expressions, the betel-chewing dhoti-clad politicians. Under the floss of some bizarre practices the old world managed to preserve discipline,

decency, fellow-feeling and camaraderie. The values of new world are selfishness, crudity, vulgarity and hatred. The protagonist of the novel, a colonel, barely manages to survive, although his commitment to the values of the past is exposed to the repeated onslaught of modern and hostile pressures.

A Bend in the Ganges is an epic saga of the decade leading to partition and the forces which engineered its bloody consummation plunging Modern India into its darkest hour; where over three million people died, over a million women were raped, abducted and mutilated, and several million rendered helpless refugees, left to fend for themselves in the quagmire of post partition existence teeming with poverty, disease and death.

Malgonkar deals with the sensitive and complicated issue of the seemingly sudden transformation of Indian nationalism versus British colonialism into a direct Hindu Muslim conflict which led to the partition of India.

Indo-British relationship portrayed in *A Bend in the Ganges* is purely political. There are three facets of this relationship portrayed in the novel—the attitude of the ordinary Indian, of the educated and enlightened, and of the Indian capitalist class. Also, the author refers to the two different facets of the attitude of the educated and enlightened, by bringing in Gandhiji and Nehru with their peaceful and non-violent methods, besides portraying the terrorists dissatisfied with such methods. All these are encapsulated in this story with the Indian Independence Movement as its background.

Debi and Shafi, the prominent among the terrorists, do not have much political conviction to turn to terrorism against the British. Of the two, Shafi seems to have a better political motive for his hatred of the British. About the crawling order of General Dyer he tells his companions: “This is the sort of insult we have to avenge” (*Bend* 75). In their revolutionary zeal they hated the British and the non-violent nationalists. Shafi blames Gandhiji and the Congress for having played into British hands to make the Indians a nation of sheep. But their zeal for sabotage does not weaken the Government; it only awakens them, and they are ruthlessly suppressed.

The attitude of the ordinary Indian to British rule is portrayed in greater detail through Hari and Gian, and Tukaram, their servant. The great esteem and faith the ordinary Indians had in the British is seen first in the words of the unlettered servant to Gian: “*Have you become a congress-wallah? Joined the cranks who want to send away the sahibs? What will we do without the sahibs; they don't take bribes, like our people*”

The novel stands out as an example of Malgonkar's insight into life. In this novel Malgonkar introduces a domestic tale of two characters against the background, the tense years of the freedom struggle. Like Khushwant Singh's *A Train to Pakistan*, Malgonkar's novel is exact about events in relation to time and close to the facts. While graphically depicting the horror and futility of the Partition riots, Malgonkar gains in depth by probing the validity of ideologies of violence and nonviolence and their relevance to life. The novel almost approaches the epic movement in its authentic evaluation of human tragedy. Both Gian and Debidayal espouse non-violence and violence as definite ways of life, and yet finally in their confrontation with the inevitable

reality of life they realize the futility of the abstract formulations. Both seek and find real fulfilment in the humanizing power of love.

Malgonkar attempts to pinpoint in the novel the inadmissibility of any ideology being valid for the many unpredictable in inexplicable situations of life. Ideologies divorced from the reality of life become sterile and anti-human. Life in the rich variety refuses to be moulded into a neat framework of a given ideology. Mahatma Gandhi himself was in doubt about his experiment with the ideology of non-violence. Malgonkar quotes the passage as the epigraph of his novel:

It almost appears as if we are nursing in the bosoms the desire to take revenge the first time we get the opportunity. Can true, voluntary non-violence come out of this seeming forced non-violence of the weak? Is it not a futile experiment I am conducting? What if, when the fury bursts, not a man, woman, or child is safe and every man's hand is raised against his neighbour?

Gandhi's own fears come true in the wake of the Independence, revealing the incongruity of non-violence juxtaposed to the grim holocaust.

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, mutilated.

One may in fact agree with Tekchand in the novel that for the bulk of the people, Gandhi's message of non-violence had no other significance than as a mere political expedient:

It seemed that the moment the grip of British power was loosened, the population of the subcontinent had discarded non-violence overnight and were now spending themselves on orgies of violence which seemed to fulfil some basic urge

Malgonkar also depicts man's inner urge for violence or his "hidden, capacity for violence often brought out by the destructive acts of others."¹⁶ Perhaps Malgonkar would like to ask more precisely like the revolutionary Basu in the novel:

Would you remain non-violent if someone threw acid at the girl you love? Would Gandhi?

Malgonkar appears to discredit non-violence through the weak and fumbling Gian even before the items are states properly. Amur accuses Malgonkar of ignoring the non-violence of the strong which demands "a greater heroism than violence itself" as exemplified by the Mahatma and Martin Luther King in their lives. Malgonkar gives the impression that he wants to tell the whole story from the points of view of revolutionaries who condemn non-violence as "the philosophy of sheep." Both Amur and Asnani accuse him of "being biased and influenced by his own personal predilections" in focusing only on the superficial aspect of non-violence.

It is true that non-violence demands greater courage than violence. But in practice it has become a creed of hypocrisy. Very few among the throng who swear by non-violence measure up to the high standard of integrity

and discipline demanded of it. Malgonkar may have deliberately shaped Gian in order to reveal with pitiless irony the gap between precept and practice. He has very cautiously stayed away from the easy temptation of fashioning Gian into an inviolable champion of non-violence.

He would have in all probability created a blood-less saint. It is difficult to test non-violence in a realistic situation with credibility. Often the idealistic heroes tend to be sentimental in fiction. In the present context ideals can be affirmed only by the technique of indirection or what Ihab Hassan chooses to call “deflection.” Hassan believes that there is a persistent irony. Gian’s character illustrates the technique of indirection in revealing the strength of non-violence through caricature of deflection.

Malgonkar does not, however, uphold violence as a way of life. In the death of Debidayal, Malgonkar discards violence by revealing its self-consuming nature. Ultimately the affirmation is in “the value of love which transcends violence of non-violence – the real and the unreal – and brings about freedom and fulfilment to the individuals.” Both Gian and Debidayal seek their redemption in love.

Although *A Bend in the Ganges* like *A Train to Pakistan* affirms the value of love as transcending all barriers against the background of horrid communal riots, Malgonkar’s novel examines more thoroughly the steady though subtle corruption of the idealist freedom fighters in the context of communal loyalties. The novel also draws comparison with John Masters’s *Bhowani Junction* in the authentic description of the historic background of the freedom struggle.

This basic pattern in the novels of Malgonkar—the individual stranded at cross-roads and faced with a moral predicament or impelled to seek his identity—is vastly enriched by the detailed yet sweeping account of social, political and historical circumstances. In fact, so powerful and precise is his historical vision that at times his novels read like documentary, true-life accounts of the tempestuous events described. Quite often, his focus shifts from the individual to the event the presentation of which is marked by sharp detail, epic dimension and genuine authenticity. Also present is an intricate network of social relations depicting the arrogant and complacent ruling English, the middling and pathetic Eurasians, the feudal princes in their intimate palaces where intrigues and conspiracies breed, the Indian army officers trained in the culture of their English superiors, the vast India upper and lower middle classes with their ambitions and frustrations, the new-fangled unscrupulous politicians, the untouchables, the labourers, and the criminals. The world of Malgonkar’s fiction is vast and captures the massive flux of life in India in all its richness and variety.

A Bend in the Ganges paints the panorama of life in India in all its vividness. The placid life in a Panjab town, the sylvan rolling fields of Gian’s ancestral village in the hills, the wild and primitive conditions at the Cellular jail on the island of Andaman, the jet-set life styles 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, they lend an epic dimension to the entire scene. Similarly, the action of the novel begins in 1930’s and extends up to the dawn of Independence in August 1947, thus encompassing the history of a saga depicting the movement for Independence, the World War and the Partition of India.

How does Malgonkar manage to hold this disparate material together? Apart from the fact that the action is too spread out and the time-span is rather long, there is also the problem of accommodation of two protagonists, Gian and Debi, in the plot. As a result, the plot appears to be complex, meandering, at times shapeless, zigzagging between the two main episodes. One feels, at times that the plot is so supple and loose that a number of other possible episodes, for example, describing terrorist exploits or brutalities in the prison or love scenes between Gian and Sundri, could have been included without making any difference. And yet the plot has a basic unity which singularly holds together, firstly by a series of sharp contrasts and correspondences between the two protagonists and secondly, through a carefully chalked out ever-recurring pattern of betrayal and revenge in the story.

A Bend in the Ganges remains a classic; one of the best novels of partition written till date; a gripping narrative, with a bold gallery of characters and their successful blend into a revolutionary story which redefines the making of the nation and the travesties played amidst its tragedies. The writing is top class, provocatively constituted yet aesthetically presented. The noted critic and writer K R Srinivasa Iyengar concludes that the shame and agony of the partition, the glory and the defeat of the hour of freedom, the tryst with destiny that was also the death-trap fashioned by the malignant time spirit; the horror and the humiliation; the terror and the pity of it all are the theme of Malgonkar's novel. It is a bolder experiment in artistically fusing the personal and historical perspective in fictional terms.

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