

## **Gandhian Doctrine of *Ahimsa*, Communalism and Nationality in Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges***

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### **Abstract**

Manohar Malgonkar's political novel *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) presents a coherent version of the extant milieu of Indian civic and national life from the time of the Civil Disobedience Movement of the 1930s to the threshold of declaration of Independence in August, 1947 and the accompanied partition and its aftermath on the socio-cultural life of Indian people. The novelist, like a genuine and impartial historian poignantly outlines the troubled transformation of the colonized sub-continent, its bifurcation along the religious lines and to what extent the existing politico-religious scenario affects the perception of freedom and nationality of the novel's central protagonists, namely Debi Dayal and Shafi Usman, and Gian Talwar amid the confusion and catastrophe before, during, and after the partition. Besides, offering a critique of the Gandhian doctrine of absolute non-violence (*ahimsa*) as the soul pathway for achieving liberation from the British, the narrative also focuses on the communal violence that jeopardised the otherwise secular and tolerant idea of mutual trust and harmonious cohabitation among the countrymen prior to the declaration of Independence. The present essay attempts an analysis of this complex political situation as incorporated by Malgonkar in this novel and explores the effectiveness of the ideology of non-violence, religious extremism in determining national loyalties at the time of the infamous partition of the British Indian subcontinent in 1947.

**Keywords:** *ahimsa* (non-violence), communalism, religion, nationality.

Manohar Malgonkar's political novel *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) captures the extant milieu of Indian civic and national life from the time of the Civil Disobedience Movement of the 1930s to the threshold of declaration of Independence in August, 1947 and the accompanied partition and its aftermath on the socio-cultural life of Indian people. Like a true historian, Malgonkar takes into account the Swadeshi Movement, the Quit India Movement, the impressive participation and sacrifice of the freedom fighters, the eruption of the Second World War, the retreat of the British from Rangoon, the explosion at the Bombay Dock (1944), and finally, the division of the country on the basis of religious salience. The broad spectrum of the novel is marked by, to quote, N.S. Pradhan, "sharp detail, epic dimension, and genuine authenticity" (139). The individual predicament fraught with contemporary bewilderment and disorderliness at the time of split of the erstwhile unified country has been explored and illustrated with comprehensive accounts of the violence and infernal bloodshed from a human context. This essay takes into account this complex historical backdrop and explores the effectiveness of Gandhian principle of non-violence, religious polarization of communities and communal strife and the role of religion in determining national loyalties at the time of the infamous partition of the British India in 1947.

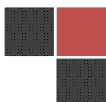
The staple of the novel is, of course, the extraordinary uncertain situations coeval with the political climate of the time, and to convey that troubled scenario, Malgonkar presents the torment and ideological conundrum experienced by Gian Talwar, Debi Dayal, and Shafi Usman - central protagonists of the narrative-around whom, the story revolves. The debate that influenced the whole country during that period was the argument over the effectiveness of violence and nonviolence as a strategy for achieving liberation. The contradictory character of the "Author's Note" and the "Epigraph" adds to that obvious difference. "The Epigraph" is marked by Gandhiji's own realization about the practice of non-violence:

This non-violence, therefore, seems to be due mainly to our helplessness. It almost appears as if we are nursing in our 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? (n.p.)

Whereas the "Author's Note", on the other hand, is more assertive:

Only the violence in this story happens to be true. 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. (n.p.)

Even a cursory reading of the above-quoted passages reveals that Gandhiji himself was not confident enough about the effective materialization of his principle of *ahimsa* (nonviolence) as a strategy towards liberation from the bondage of the British imperialism. His anticipation of the possible failure of this experiment in the hands of those who are opportunists and of morally cowardice nature and his awareness of the violent nature a man possesses emphasize his evident ideological perturbation. Both the excerpts, thus, provide a preliminary base insinuating the indication of enormous communal polarization



and violence during the course of the novel. The novel's opening shows, how ironically, the apostles of non-violence are actually involved in violence, however of a different dimension, by burning the British garments. Malgonkar points out that how the fire is raging throughout the market square amidst the deafening shouting - "Boycott British goods! Mahatma Gandhi-ki jai!" - of the young students from schools and colleges in a "ceremony of purification" (1):

The fire that raged in the market square was just one of hundreds and thousands of similar *fires* all over the country.<sup>1</sup> (1) [Emphasis mine]

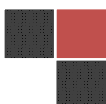
Such *fires* attest that Mahatma's apprehension was correct in his realization of the vainness of this doctrine of passive resistance as an expression of dissent. The authorial cynicism, too, shows how violence is a constitutive feature of human unconscious. The unprecedented massacre of humaneness that took place in 1947, the heavy casualties, the savageries, and the price that was paid for the attainment of freedom justify this aspect. As a text dealing with the "whys" of the Partition" (Roy 62), *A Bend in the Ganges* exposes conflicting loyalty, diverse forces and ideologies at work. Rituparna Roy observes:

The novel delineates with insight, penetration and utter analytical precision the uneasy transformation of colonized country into sovereign state, the difficult passage from the familiar shackles of bondage to the disturbing challenges of freedom. (Roy 62)

Besides emphasizing the sectarian dissent that jeopardized the otherwise secular and tolerant idea of mutual trust and harmonious cohabitation among countrymen prior to the declaration of Independence, the novel, also, assesses its consequences and nature on psycho-sociological behaviour of the people. By choosing a wide canvas from the 1930s to the Independence and dismemberment of the country, Malgonkar has incorporated in the novel the domestic as well as national politico-religious aspects of the nation and ideologies of the time. In this sense, the skeptical title is quite self-explanatory. Usha Bande writes:

The Ganges in the title is the Ganga, symbol of India, of her culture, including her history; the 'bend' is the turn historical forces have taken leading to partition and dislocation. The title is derived from the epigraph to the novel, a quotation from the Ramayana in which Rama and Sita are delighted to see the beauty of the Ganges where it bends to move on further. It is the present context of fragmented India, rived by violence and disorder that the title bears an ironic tinge. (Bande74)

Through the characters of Gian Talwar, a college student and ardent Gandhian, Debi Dayal, an ardent believer in violent and terrorist protests, and Shafi Usman, a votary of unity and brotherhood and their activities and participation in the political scenario of the times, Malgonkar analyses the ideological contours of violence and nonviolence and gradual slackening of moral and religious fiber of the nation beleaguered by the forces of history. Gian, an orthodox Brahmin from a small village called Konshet comes to Duriabad for higher education and is exposed to Gandhian ideals of truth and nonviolence in the opening chapter. He got so fascinated at the exhortations of the Gandhian devotee to boycott British goods and to follow the path of *ahimsa* and saintly presence of Gandhiji that unknowingly he got baptized in the sacrificial campaign:



‘Mahatma Gandhi-ki jai!’ Gian found himself muttering ‘Bharat-mata-ki-jai! The path of ahimsa is not for cowards.’ The words were almost like a private prayer. (4)

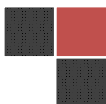
On the other hand, both Debi and Shafi emblemize that group of nationalists who count on violence as the only means for attainment of Independence. Under the guise of a ‘terrorist’<sup>2</sup> unit called “Freedom Fighters”, they band together in a secular association called Hanuman Club, and carry out their undercover operations. They believe that the imperial force shrewdly manipulates the religious issues to sustain their grip over the country, and the sole strategy to counter such hegemonic oppression requires unity among all communities throughout the country. The secret codes with which the members use to greet each other encompass two dominant religions of the country: Hinduism (Jai-ram!) and Islam (Jai-rahim!). Extremists by nature, they are proactive to rid the country of its malady:

They are 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. (65-66)

Ideologically, they despise Gandhian principles and even suspect that Gandhiji’s non-violent movement is backed by the British to fortify their ground and the Indian National Congress might have been brought into play by the British:

They even suspected that it was a movement secretly supported by the British to strengthen their hold on the country: was not the Indian National Congress started by an Englishman? (66)

Shafi Usman, as the young and dynamic leader of the band, is devoted to the complete deposition of the British rule from the soil of India. His father’s death at the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre of 1919 and inhuman atrocities of the British made him believe that the British could be ousted only by violent means and the theory of “non-violence is a naked insult to the land of Shivaji and Akbar and Ranjeet.” (69) Starting with painting Hindi digits on milestones and road signs, and writing anti-British slogans on multiple walls, the club members are now engaged in burning postboxes, tarring the statues of the British administrators, severing telegraphic services, cutting telephone wires, removing fishplates from the railway tracks and, even, blowing up airplanes with explosive devices. The group prided in the fact that their leader is the most ‘wanted’ person in the state and “the British police had proclaimed a reward of a thousand rupees to anyone giving information leading to his capture-‘dead or alive’, as the official phrase put it.” (66) As a counter strategy, Shafi, now calls himself Singh and has grown a beard and continues to guide their terrorist activities, with much sensitivity. In the context of growing differences that have now arisen between the Hindus and the Muslims in their struggle against the British “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”. (66) The club-members are absolutely unaffected by the current tendencies of religious fanaticism throughout the entire country and all the representatives from Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs are grouped together under Shafi’s able leadership. And they nurture a good deal of contempt against the followers of non-violence like Gian Talwar. In the chapter called “The Green Flash at Sunset” in the Birchi-bagh picnic spot the ideological clash between Gian and Shafi on



non- violence and violence comes to the fore. For Gian, Gandhiji is divine and he proudly calls himself as a follower of Gandhiji. Not only he professes non-violence but also he emphatically asserts that Gandhiji alone could take the country towards Independence. In opposition, calling Gandhiji the only enemy of India's national aspirations, Shafi Usman scoffs at Gandhian ideals of non-violence. He repeatedly asks Gian if he could provide a single instance where a country has obtained its freedom from foreign bondage through non-violence. He affirms his belief:

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. (12)

Shafi continues to accuse Gandhiji of weakening the spirit of the people and anticipates the nonviolent resistance, to the contrary, would claim more lives than violent protests:

A million shall die, I tell you – a million? For each man who should have died in the cause of freedom, Gandhi will sacrifice ten. That is what non-violence will do to this country. (13)

Trapped in this high-pitched argument, Gian, too, stands his ground and holds out to his self-conviction that true freedom is achievable only through “the path of non-violence, the creed of ahimsa!”(13) Displeased at Shafi's deliberate gibe, he counters:

Ahimsa is the noblest of creeds... There can be nothing more sacred. No man has the right to raise his hand against another, whatever the provocation. I shall never do it. It takes greater courage; non-violence is not for the weak. (13)

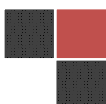
But, later on he gets caught up in an intense family feud on property issues with his shrewd cousin, Vishnu-dutt who kills his brother, Hari in the ensuing brawl. In a state of deep remorse he begins to question the credo of nonviolence:

‘Coward ... coward!’ he kept accusing himself, fanning the flame. Was that why he had embraced the philosophy of non-violence without question—from physical cowardice, not from courage? Was his non-violence merely that of the rabbit refusing to confront the hound? (44)

In real-life situations, he discovers the fallibility of nonviolence as a way of life and starts harbouring to avenge his brother's gruesome death through equally violent means out of his brotherly commitment, restoration of family prestige and his perception of righteousness. And in this self-fulfilling execution, his real self is revealed. His adherence to the creed of nonviolence is rather superficial, substantiating Shafi's claim how young people suppress their cowardice under the pretext of this creed and are they incapable of any conscientious action. The novelist, too, comments:

What was his jurisdiction? – his light-hearted acceptance of the creed of non-violence? But that was merely a political expedient—a weapon specially forged against the British; how could it serve a philosophy of life itself? (55)

In the Andamans, where both are imprisoned, watching Gian's absolute indifference towards the civic and political problems of the country, and his shameless admiration for the British, Debi wonders:



Was Gian the man, ... the non-violent disciple of Gandhi who had been convicted for murder? ... Gian was not certainly the man. He was typical of the youth of India, vacillating, always seeking new anchors, new directions, devoid of any basic convictions. He had already jettisoned non-violence; how far would he go with truth? (149)

Along with this attitudinal shift on Gian's part, the novel also vividly records how the communal poison infected the secular fabric of the entire subcontinent. Shafi's biased nature, which is evident from the incident of betrayal he committed against Debi Dayal and other Hindu members of the Hanuman club and got them arrested on the charge of airplane explosion in this personal level, is symbolic of the variable political terrains in the national level. The Congress and the Muslim League could not go more in unison and they are finally parting ways. Even the leaders, through religious exhortations, began fomenting divisiveness that points out the fissures within the apparent integrative nature of the subcontinent. In 1940, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, in the Lahore Session of the Muslim League, contended for a separate Muslim state by highlighting that Hinduism and Islam

...are not religions in the strict sense of the word, but are, in fact, different and distinct social orders ... Hindus and Muslims belong to two different religious philosophies, social customs, literatures. They neither inter-marry nor inter-dine together, and, indeed, they belong to two different civilizations which are based on conflicting ideas and conception.<sup>3</sup>

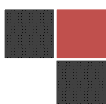
In the novel, Hafiz Khan who orchestrates the terrorist activities from Bombay, voices the same considerations. Surreptitiously, he advises Shafi to turn their back on the Hindus and redirect their activities towards the Hindus instead of the British:

Go on with ever greater vigour – but only as pure Muslim organization. The Hindu element must be eliminated. Our methods remain as they are; only our targets have changed. We have to be ready to use the same methods against the Hindus. (86)

Citing the partialities of the Congress leaders, quantitative Hindu domination in the governmental hierarchies, and numerous examples of police atrocities against the Muslims leaving aside the Hindus at the time riots, Hafiz impresses upon Shafi how the Muslims will be made the religious as well as political 'other' under the Congress-Hindu regime once political independence is won. He advises Shafi: "Organize ourselves before it's too late. Carve out our own country." (84) Shafi who always valorized and maintained communal cohabitation finds it quite incompatible to think of such separatist tendencies. Torn between Hafiz's continuous polemic against the Hindus and the Congress and his own ideals of incorporative nationalism, Shafi becomes perplexed and thinks of compromising himself with Gandhian nonviolent movement against the British. But, Hafiz's fanatic approach towards Gandhi ultimately dissuades him:

In the midst of Gandhi's non-violence, violence persists. Violence such as no one has ever seen. That is what awaits this country: the violence bottled up in those who pay lip service to non-violence. The Hindus are preparing for it - to kill us, to swamp us. (87)

Hafiz's tactful yet divisive politics framed with religious terms pierces the reinforced secular crust of the Hanuman Club and planted the seed of irreconcilable discord between the Hindus and the Muslims. The British police officer's reminiscence of the episode of



raiding the Club in his conversation with the Captain of the ship reveals how that deep-seated divisiveness has already started souring the club's enduring communal solidarity:

When our men raided the place, only seven were there. The others had fled. It is rather funny, really; all seven were Hindus; not a single Muhammadan in the lot; which makes us think that there was some kind of a rift among them... (125)

Contrary to the notion that religious belief-system offers a rationale for existence and a unique worldview,<sup>4</sup> the integrative commonality of the Hanuman club and its eventual disintegration, thus, represents prevalent political theatre around the use and misuse of religion during the Partition. Padmanabhan observes how the club

... becomes a microcosm of the macrocosm that was Indian society, with the Hindus and Muslims united at first to fight against the British, and, at last when they were about to leave, fighting against each other. (Padmanabhan 110)

Hafiz's exhortation for creation of a new nation carved out of India for the Muslims "that will be wholly Muslim; pure, uncontaminated" thus finds maturity accompanied with harrowing occurrences religious fanaticism. Gyanendra Pandey puts the complex web of political bargaining that played a crucial role in this division and articulation of 'One Country, Two Nations'<sup>5</sup> theory, succinctly:

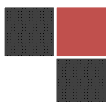
Much of the politics of the previous three or four decades had been about national liberation. It was a serious complication that the call for Indian self-government was now joined by the call for Muslim self-government in a new country to be named Pakistan. Talk of independence was rife. However, while the Congress and those in sympathy with it expected the independence of a united India, the Muslim League slogan became 'Pakistan for Independence'. There were two nations in India, it was argued, and the acceptance of the Pakistan demand was the only road to genuine independence of all Indians, the Muslims in a free Pakistan and the Hindus in a free Hindustan.<sup>6</sup> (Pandey 21)

But to read the novel as a political narrative dealing with the Partition and the infernal bloodshed that accompanied it is to miss the elements of conflicting human relationships, and psychological commotion experienced by the characters. Usha Bande notes how Malgonkar has developed the storyline on the basis of "three distinct strands: (i) Debidayal and Gian, as antithesis to each other; (ii) the communal strand represented by Shafi who vows to forge unity but under communal pressure betrays his Hindu brethren; and (iii) thirdly it is the story of growth - of human beings as well as of nationalism." (Bande 78) What is striking is the way how in a simple narrative Malgonkar deftly manages the wide canvas from the angle of a true historian to offer a commentary on the psychic aspects of nationality, individual quandary in times of tumultuous times and unrepealable proceedings of history.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>The textual quotes are from the 1967 edition of *A Bend in the Ganges*, brought out by the London based publishing house Hamish Hamilton.

<sup>2</sup>The "Revolutionary nationalism for Indian Independence" or the "terrorist movement" consisting the activities of the underground revolutionary groups who believed in armed



protests against the ruling British fall into this category, as opposed to the generally peaceful Civil Disobedience Movement led by Gandhiji. Bengal, Maharashtra, Bihar, the United Provinces and Punjab were the leading centres of this matrix of revolutionary organizations which came into prominence in the earlier part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century oftentimes working together towards the cause of Indian liberation movement. For detailed analytical discussions, see, Durba Ghosh, *Gentlemanly Terrorists: Political Violence and the Colonial State in India, 1919-1947* (Cambridge University Press, 2017.)

<sup>3</sup>Quoted by Bookman, L. Martin in the essay called “Hindus and Muslims: Communal Relations and Cultural Integration” in *Religious Politics and Communal Violence*, edited by Steven I. Wilkinson (Oxford University Press 2005), p. 131.

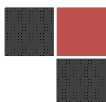
<sup>4</sup>For this hypothesis, I am indebted to the essay called “Hindus and Muslims: Communal Relations and Cultural Integration” by Bookman, L. Martin in *Religious Politics and Communal Violence*, edited by Steven I. Wilkinson (Oxford University Press 2005), p. 132. Here, Bookman discusses the idea of ‘a unique cognitive worldview embodied in religious system’ from sociological perspectives considering the theories put forward by thinkers like Charles Y. Glock, Rodney Stark and Clifford Greetz.

<sup>5</sup>Before the Partition of India, Syed Ahmed Khan of Aligarh University, in his famous address “One Country, Two Nations”, in December 1887 at a public gathering in Lucknow, affirmed that India had two nations- the Mohammedans and the Hindus. Because of their opposing cultures and traditions, they couldn’t be united, and two nations required to be formed in one country. He again addressed the people on the subject of a separate nation at Meerut in March 1888. Syed Ameer Ali of Calcutta, the first Indian High Court judge, was the next sponsor of this two-nation theory. Yet another public figure to do so was poet Allama Iqbal in 1930 at the Allahabad session of the Muslim League. However, he spoke of two Muslim nations within the Indian confederation; one in the north-west and the other in the east. (Obtained from an article called “ Tale of Two Nations” by Prafull Goradia from the issue of 1<sup>st</sup> November, 2019 of The Statesman, Kolkata and accessed at [www.thestatesman.com](http://www.thestatesman.com) on 19<sup>th</sup> June, 2020.)

<sup>6</sup>Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History of India* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 21.

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