Stanley Wolpert, one of the most reputed historians of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent, acknowledges the intellectual debt in 2006, exactly fifty years after the novel ‘Train to Pakistan’ (New York, 1956) was first published. He comments: “Khushwant Singh’s searing novel Mano Majra (Train to Pakistan, New York, 1956) first made me aware of the human impact of Partition tragedy on Punjab.” His comment, in a way, sums up the stature of Singh’s novel as a Partition text.
Certainly *Train to Pakistan* was the first English novel to be written on the theme of Partition, and it also happened to be Khushwant Singh’s first book. Singh himself was trained as a lawyer and practiced in Lahore High Court till the Partition took him away from his beloved city and landed him, like hundreds and thousands of other Sikhs and Hindus at the time, in Delhi. Since then, during the six decades, he has been adorned with many titles – that of diplomat, eminent journalist/Columnist, reputed historian, distinguished editor, and one of India’s most respected as well as controversial public figure.

All through his long career in writing and publishing, Khushwant Singh wrote several novels, especially *Train to Pakistan* (1956), *I shall Not Hear the Nightingale* (1959), *Delhi* (1983), *In the Company of Women* (1999), and most recently, *Burial at Sea* (2004). Among these, *Train to Pakistan* remains the best and also the most well-known Partition novel in English to date. No other novel that came after it (and there have been many), however famous or brilliant, has been able to supplant it in popularity and even when it comes to commentators and critics, it has had a phenomenal track record. In this respect, it is interesting to note that even novelists who have themselves
written on the subject of the Partition have praised it highly. Salman Rushdie, for instance, praised it as “The only good book on the theme of Partition”\(^5\), while Amitav Ghosh has acknowledged it as ‘a classic’\(^6\) critics of the Indian-English novel, from K.R.S. Iyengar and Meenakshi Mukherjee to William Walsh and Paul Brians, have also felt it necessary to devote a great deal of critical space and attention to \textit{Train to Pakistan}. This already existing copious criticism notwithstanding, \textit{Train to Pakistan} cannot be ignored in any study that attempts to explore the development of the Partition theme in the Indian-English novel. Hence it will be the first novel to be examined in this book.

\textit{Train to Pakistan} is a vignette – the depiction of a sleepy little village called Mano Majra, situated on the declared border between the still-to-be- formed nations of India and Pakistan, suddenly waking to unprecedented violence and horror on the eve of the Partition. The action covers only a few weeks and deals mainly with the predicament of a quite caught up in the whirlwind of the Partition. It is noticeable that there is certain symmetry to the action depicted in that both at the beginning and end of the novel there are identical situations: a trainload of dead bodies (all of that a trainload of dead all of them Muslims)
should go over to Pakistan at the end. Only, in the latter case, this is prevented at the last minute by the cunning of one man and the sacrifice of another.

In his autobiography, Truth, Love & a Little Malice: An Autobiography, Khushwant Singh recounts that while he was practicing law in Sikh villages from where (his) clients came as backgrounds for (his) he had narrowly missed being murdered on his way to Lahore from Ab’ (...) learnt from the papers that the train by which (he) had traveled had been held up at the signal near Taxile station and all the Sikh passengers in it dragged out and murdered.⁷

Two things clearly emerge from these reminiscences: first, that by 1956, Khushwant Singh had already written fiction that used the village as a backdrop; and second, that he had himself (even if he had not actually faced violence) known of many instances of train-related killings on the Punjab border on the eve of the Partition. It needs to be noted too that as an amateur historian, Singh could not but have been conscious of the momentous age of Indian history that he had lived through. This must have prompted him to write fiction, for he probably found fiction to be a better medium than history to reflect on
contemporary realities. However, his instincts as a historian, together with his own experiences at the time of the Partition, combined with his budding skills as a fiction writer, all came together to produce *Train to Pakistan*. The novel itself entitled Mano Majra in the American edition was first published in 1956, within a decade of India’s Independence. As K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar remarks:

“It could not have been an easy novel to write. The events, so recent, so terrible in their utter savagery and meaninglessness, must have defied assimilation in terms of art…”

Yet, whatever may have been the specific difficulties, aesthetic or otherwise, faced by the novelist, it is undeniable that the novelist succeeded in writing a novel of abiding popularity with political events. ‘Events’ in themselves occupy an important place in this novel, even to the exclusion of such features as psychological insight, probably because the author lived too near to the events he describes. This is the case, in fact, with not only *Train to Pakistan* but also Manohar Malgonkar’s Partition novel *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964), respectively, these two works of fiction can almost be taken as direct political and social
documents of the Partition. Yet they are radically different not only in their focus, but also in their selection of events and in their styles of narration.

Before moving on to an analysis of Singh’s novel and its depiction of events, it is relevant to pause and reflect on the symbolic significance of trains with regard to the Partition in general and Partition literature in particular. Trains happen to be one of the most enduring images of the Partition of the subcontinent. An image of overloaded trains, with people pasted on to every possible part of its body—clinging on to the windows, perched precariously on footboards, hanging between the buffers, crowding on the roofs— is what immediately comes to mind while thinking of the Partition. It is an image that has been permanently imprinted on the nation’s collective imagination; and has become, over the decades, a convenient short hand to refer to the Partition. For instance, it may be pointed out that as many as three books relating to the Partition published within the last decade in India have, on their front covers, pictures of such trains.9

Passing from one warring territory to another, the train carries not just dead bodies, but horrific tales and rumours as
well. Thus, the train acquires the status of reporter, traveling far and wide to report on the violence stalking the country during the dark days of the Partition.

In *Train to Pakistan* the violence that erupted at the time of the Partition is represented in a very unusual way. There is no detailed description in the novel of the train journey undertaken by the refugees—terms of neither the practical difficulties faced nor the dangers involved. More importantly, we are also not shown the violence happening; for there is not even a reported description of the incidents in the novel. We are just informed about the end result of the violence: the trainloads of corpses that arrive at Mano Majra. What is detailed by Khushwant Singh is the aftermath of the violence, that is, how the trainloads of the dead are successively disposed of; how it changes everything in the village; and how another similar event is prevented from happening. The train, in fact, has a completely different symbolic value in Singh’s text in as much as it represents an otherwise insulated village’s tenuous link with the outside world. Most importantly, the trains running to and for Mano Majra are shown to regulate the life of the village and its inhabitants. Thus, the disruption in the railway schedule after the Partition functions in
the novel as a sign of social chaos, as the following passage makes it clear:

“Early in September the time schedule in Mano Majra started going wrong. Trains became less punctual than ever before and many more started to run through at night. Some days it seemed as though the alarm clock had been set for the wrong hour. On others, it was as if no one had remembered to wind it. Imam Baksh waited for Meet Singh to make the first start. Meet Singh waited for the mullah’s call to prayer before getting up. People stayed in bed late without realizing that times had changed and the mail train might not run through at all. Children did not know when to be hungry, and clamoured for food all the time. In the evenings, everyone was indoors before sunset and in bed before the express came by – if it did come by. A goods train has stopped running altogether, so there was no lullaby to lull them to sleep. Instead, ghost trains went past at odd hours between midnight and dawn, disturbing the dreams of Mano Majra.10. This is just the prelude to the nightmare that the villagers of Mano Majra have to undergo in the next few weeks in the wake of the Partition. There is a succession of violent and unprecedented
events that follow each other rapidly in the summer of 1947, learning the villagers totally helpless and disoriented. Bhai Meet Singh, the priest of the Gurudwara, very aptly sums up what the villagers go through towards the end of the novel. Updating Iqbal (a communist agent just released from jail) on the recent events in Mano Majra, the Bhai tells him:

What has been happening? Ask me what has not been happening. Trainsloads of dead people came to Mano Majra. We burned one lot and buried another. The river was flooded with corpses. Muslims were evacuated, and in their place, refugees have come from Pakistan.¹¹

The above words are of crucial significance as they detail the major five events around which the narrative of *Train to Pakistan* is woven.

Of all these events, it is the third one, that is, the eviction of the Muslims from their own village that is accorded a place of primacy in the narrative; certainly, it is the most poignant part of the whole book. It is pathetic the way Imam Baksh comes to the Sikh assembly and asks their verdict on the sudden decision of the local administration to evacuate the Muslim villagers of Mano Majra in the faint hope that they will ask him and his fellow
Muslims to stay. He is reassured, only to be disappointed, for everybody understands the purport of the lamberdier’s words when he says:

_Yes, you are our brothers. As far as we are concerned, you and your children and your grand-children can live here as long as you like... But Chacha, we are so few and the strangers coming from Pakistan are coming in thousands. Who will be responsible for what they do?_ ¹²

The Chacha accepts his fate, though with a heavy heart, but his daughter Nooran simply refuses to leave the place of her birth. She is fierce in her assertion of her rights as opposed to the emotional outburst of her father in the Sikh gathering. Chacha tells her that if she does not leave by herself, then she will be ‘thrown out’. And in fact, that is exactly what happens to the Muslims in Mano Majra, for they are ‘thrown out’ by their fellow villagers.

By themselves and as a community, the villagers are native and ignorant people with very little political awareness and with even less knowledge of what was happening in India at the time. Independence and the partition had not affected their lives till then, just as the struggle for freedom had made no difference in
their day-to-day affairs. They could not even understand what the fuss about Independence was all about. As the lambardar asks:

*Freedom must be good thing. But what will we get out of it? Educated people like you, Babu Sahib, will get the jobs the English had. Will we get more lands or more buffaloes?*

When such a community of people who seem to have no dealings with the political life of the nation whatsoever are suddenly thrust into the vortex of a political cataclysm, it is but natural that it would not register on them at first. As Singh shows in the novel, it is through the medium of the refugees that the people of Mano Majra first come to know of the violence just outside the confines of their little world, a violence that was spilling over and now spreading into the heart of their own village. But they were ignorant of the extent of the savagery that was now rampant all across the western and eastern borders of India (the areas where the migrations took place, where there were wholesale exchanges of population). That they were ignorant event after having burnt a trainload of corpses is because of the fact that though they were shocked and stunned by such a happening, they had taken it to be an exception and could not
believe it to be the rule. That is why the Sikh officer merciless, sarcastic words at the time of the Muslim evacuation come as a blow to the villagers. When Meet Singh expresses his discomfort with the idea of being entrusted with the custody of the evacuated Muslim villagers’ property, saying that it might later lead to misunderstandings between friends, the Sikh officer replies:

You are quite right, Bhaiji, there is some danger of being misunderstood. One should never touch another’s property; one should never look at another’s woman. One should just let others take one’s gods and sleep with one’s sisters. The only way people like you will understand anything is by being sent over to Pakistan; have your sisters and mothers reped in front of you, have you clothes taken off, and be sent back with a kick and spit on your behinds.¹⁴

This is actually a blow that is even worse than the evacuation of the Muslims.

Gradually, the novel records the progressive darkening of their vision as they are stripped, one by one, of all their illusions. To begin with, the Muslims of the village of Mano Majra thought they were going to the neighbouring Chandranaager camp only
for a few days, locking their houses and leaving their cattle under the case of the Sikhs. But soon they learn that though they will be staying at the camp for a while, afterwards they will have to proceed to Pakistan. The truth now strikes upon them that they have been moved to go to Pakistan, and not (as they had earlier thought) to halt and then come back to Mano Majra once the storm has blown over. But an even greater shock awaits, them, and that they can only take what they can carry in their hands. What is more, they are forced to leave everything not under the case of their fellow villagers, as they had thought, but in the custody of Malli (a dacoit of the neighbouring village) and his gang and a few refuges, and everybody knew what these people would do with their belongings. Still, a pretension is kept up by the police that their goods will be returned to them in due course, and so, a mock list is made of the items left behind. Both the Muslim and Sikh officers involved in this operation know, of course, that the Muslims are going to Pakistan forever (if they do not get killed on the way, that is); and that nothing will remain of their belongings, which will either be looted or destroyed.

Hence, the world of the Muslims in Mano Majra falls apart forever. They are stripped of all their hopes, begin to realize that
they are about to lose everything. It is unique the way this ironic building up of loss is dramatized in the novel, showing the utter helplessness of ordinary people overwhelmed by historical forces that are simply beyond their control or comprehension.

But the most poignant part of the entire episode is of course the farewell, or rather the lack of it. As the novelist writes:

*There was not time to make arrangements. There was not time even to say good-bye. Truck engines were started. Pathan soldiers rounded up the Muslims. Drove them back to the carts for a brief minute or two, and then on to the trucks. In the confusion of the rain, mud and soldiers herding the peasants about with nuzzles of their sten guns sticking in their backs, the villagers saw little of each other. All they could do was to shout their last fare-wells from the trucks… The Sikhs watched them till they were out of sight. They wiped the tears off their faces and turned back to their homes with heavy hearts.*

The chapter in which this happens is not only a very crucial one in the novel, but also a representative one, for what is shown as happening here was actually happening all around in the Punjab and Bengal in 1947. As Iyengar perceptively comments:
“What is recorded with such particularity was but a speck in the dust-whirl that was the Partition”\textsuperscript{16} this episode, in fact, effectively dramatizes what the narrator himself records on the very first page of the novel:

\textit{Hundreds of thousands of Hindus and Sikhs who had lived for centuries on the North West Frontier abandoned their homes and fled toward the protection of the predominantly Sikh and Hindu Communities in the east. They travelled on foot, in bullock carts, crammed into lossies, clinging to the sides and roofs of trains. Along the way – at fords, at crossroads, at railroad stations- they collided with panicky swarms of Muslims fleeing to safety in the West. The riots had become a rout. By the summer of 1947, when the creation of the new state of Pakistan was formally announced, ten million people – Muslims and Hindus and Sikhs – were in flight. By the time the monsoon broke, almost a million of them were dead, and all of northern India was in arms, in terror, or in hiding.}\textsuperscript{17}

We find similar reflections in a number of other Partition novels as well. There are almost identical passages in, for example, Manohar Malgonkar’s \textit{A Bend in the Ganges} and Bapsi
Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy Man*. But what is more important to note is that all such reflections highlight the fact that at the time of the Partition, most common people living on the borders suffered from the illusion that all the looting and killing was happening ‘elsewhere’, and that they themselves would remain unscathed or at least would be able to avoid it. The impression created by all these episodes is one of the Maulana Azad called the “total insanity of the two-nation theory.”

Khushwant Singh further shows that even in villages where they were no animosities between the different communities even after hearing rumours, a division was forced upon them by the administration, from the fear that things might get out of hand otherwise. The Lambardar, for instance, echoes the Magistrate Hukum Chand’s earlier ominous warning: “if something happens...”, and warms his fellow villagers that the refugees who had arrived till then were a peaceful lot only because they had not lost any of their women folk, but that if this happened, it would be difficult to contain them. The villagers are thus placed in a peculiar predicament.

Hukum Chand concocts false charges against innocent people and tries to arouse false fears to provoke the Sikhs against
the Muslims. He even draws up an elaborate plan to loosen the strong ties existent for generation between the two communities, so that the Sikhs would no longer try to stop their fellow Muslims villagers from leaving Mano Majra. Police inquiries are initiated about Fugga, Sultana and Iqbal, even though as the reactions of Meet Singh and the lambardar indicate, the villagers know very well that there is not a word of truth in the allegations made by the police, and that the facts are that Jugga would never murder anyone in his own village, that Sultana and his gang had left for Pakistan long ago and that Iqbal was actually a shaven Sikh who had come to Mano Majra only after the murder of Ramdayal, the Hindu moneylender of the village. Yet, such is the power of rumour and such is the insidious role it plays that it changes everything overnight and provokes disharmony in the hitherto peaceful village.

As Khushwant Singh indicates, the refugees themselves play a kind of catalytic role in this respect, for it is through their presence in the village that the Sikhs become aware, for the first time, of the atrocities perpetrated against their community outside the confines of their own villages. Therefore, though the Sikh villagers are initially hesitant about throwing out their
Muslims brethren, they are later persuaded to do just that. The refugees succeed in inciting the weak-minded villagers against the Muslims\textsuperscript{18} and they themselves eagerly join the notorious dacoit Malli. The novelist clearly shows the shock and bewilderment of the villagers; shows how the rhythm of their lives as disrupted, disjointed and broken.

While registering the shock of the villagers to the arrival of a whole trainful of dead Sikhs from Pakistan at their station, the narrator had said: “That evening, for the first time in the memory of Mano Majra, Imam Baksh’s sonorous cry did not rise to the heavens to proclaim the glory of God.”\textsuperscript{19} In sharp contrast to this, while dealing with the second trainload of dead at the end of the novel, there is no expression of sympathetic engagement on the part of the narrator. Rather, there is only a seathing remark:

\emph{When they came back to the village, (i.e. the people who had gone to inspect the river, to see what was floating on it) nobody was about to hear what they had to say. They were all on the roof-tops looking at his station. After two days a train had drawn up at Mano Majra in the daytime. Since the engine faced east-ward, it must have come from Pakistan. This time too the place was full of soldiers and police-men}
and the station had been cordoned off. The news of the corpses on the river was shouted from the housetops. People told each other about the mutilation of women and children. Nobody wanted to know who the dead people were, nor wanted to go to the river to find out. There was a new interest at the station, with promise of worse horrors than the last one.20

From the feeling of ‘This cannot happen to our village’ to the thrill of more violence – this shocking change in the attitude of simple village folk within the span of only a few weeks speaks volumes about the hellish nature of those times when the moral order had collapsed, and no one could make any sense of the cataclysmic changes that were happening all around them.

The narrative of Train to Pakistan thus neatly divides itself up into the five events that have been discussed so far – viz. the evacuation of Mano Majra Muslims; the burning and later burial of two trainloads of Muslims and Sikhs corpses, respectively; the arrival of refugees from across the border; and the destruction of a neighbouring village. This excessive preoccupation with events is basically Singh’s way of highlighting the terrible holocaust of the Partition. To maintain this focus, he uses a simple, straight
forward of fictional representation as the individualization of characters.

This becomes clear if we examine the figurative language used in the novel. It first appears to be in keeping with the backdrop of Mano Majra – homely images, and abundant metaphors and similes that smell of the soil. The cite a few examples:

“The head constable’s visit had divided Mano Majra into two halves as neatly as a knife cuts through a pat of butter.”

“… A snake can cast its slough but not its poison.” Bhai to Iqbal – p. 55.

“Babuji, he kills a hen which lays eggs?” Jugga to the police, p. 125.

And,

‘A wiseman swims with the current and still gets across’.

(Hukum Chand to the sub-inspector p. 116)

However, a close examination will reveal that in all the above passages, the Bhai, the Magistrate and the budmash all speak in the same idiom. By the strictest standards of novelistic
discourse, this would be deemed a flaw, but Singh’s intention here is not the individualization of characters but the foregrounding of events. This foregrounding is indeed so important a part of the narrative technique that other aspects like the individualization of characters through speech is largely ignored. Hence all the characters – good, bad, illiterate and educated – speak in the same idiom. It is almost as if the novelist is determined that nothing should come in the way to detract the attention of the reader from the main storyline. Some critics have taken serious exception to this attitude and technique of the author and criticized him for it. Suvir Kaul, in his ‘Introduction’ to the anthology, The Partitions of Memory: The After life of the Division of India says:

"That a largely mediocre novel, thin in character and event, written in an idiom that must have seemed force even in the 1950s... has achieved such prominence is surprising. This success is either a tribute to the novel’s simplicity of conception and narrative... or, more likely, follows from the fact... the novel has found a large readership, which begs the question of what it is about the power of not very
compelling writing (or indeed cinema) to keep us riveted, so long as the stories told are those of Partition? 22

This is a pertinent observation, but the answer to Kaul’s questions lies in the fact that Singh has been able to offer his readers a redeeming vision; and that it is this that has held their attention for more than half a century after it was written. For Singh’s vision, it is almost apocalyptic; and yet, it is not entirely dark.

For most ironically in this novel, just when things seem immediately dark, a vision of redeeming humanity comes from a totally respected quarter, in the form of Jugga, the budmash whom no one could trust and whom no one thought capable of any positive emotion, action or deed. We, of course, have been told very early in the novel that Jugga indulges in anti-social activities only when there is not work in the fields and his hands itch for something to do. We also know that he has been wrongly accused of murder, because when Ramdayal, the village money-lender was killed, he was away in the fields making love to Nooran, the Imam’s daughter. He is a rough and demanding lover, but also very protective of his beloved and so he frames a convincing excuse for her to give at home when she is afraid of
getting caught and threatens never to meet him again. She is
almost sacred to him, and he knows her inside out.

Hukum Chand, the District Magistrate, exploits this
emotion of Jugga to the full. No sooner does he get wind of
Jugga’s affair with Nooran and his passion for her than he
hatches a conspiracy to save the Muslims going to Pakistan.
Jugga is merely a tool in this scheme. Hukum Chand is confident
that if Jugga came to know that the villagers were planning to
prevent the train (full of Muslim refugees from the Chandannagar
Camp) from going to Pakistan, he would do everything in his
power to stop that, because his beloved Nooran would also be one
of the passengers travelling in that train. So Jugga is suddenly
released, to his great surprise, and the news of the Mano Majra
Muslims being evacuated is repeatedly hammered into his head.
Instantly, he becomes a changed man – sullen and quiet. He
comes to know of the secret plan of the villagers, but he does not
react verbally to it. The reader is told nothing about what he
intends to do, but only provided with a hint that he is aware that
he is about to do something solemn. Hence, he turns up at the
gurudwara at an ungodly hour and requests the Bhai, “I want the
Guru’s word. Will you read me a verse?” When Meet Singh asks
what he wants to do, he impatiently says, ‘It does not matter about that ... just read me a few lines quickly? Meet Singh reads out a piece from the Morning Prayer. After this, Jugga wishes him ‘Sat Sri Akal’ and takes his leave. The reader is still left ignorant of Jugga’s motive, and it is only in the last three pages of the novel that he is let in on the secret of what Jugga has set out to do: defeat the clandestine mission of his fellow villagers.

The suspense is kept up successfully till the end, and nothing quite prepares us for Jugga’s sacrifice. Though we know from the very beginning that he loves Nooran, we never think him capable of such selflessness. In fact just prior to the time the Magistrate hatches his conspiracy, the sub-inspector says that Jugga seems to be the type who is never swayed by emotion, and that probably he would not even grieve over Nooran’s loss and soon find someone else. Jugga, however, proves everyone wrong.

Jugga’s Nooran gets save. So does Haseena, the prostitute. He realizes his feelings for her only after he comes to know that all the Mano Majrans (Muslims) have been evacuated and have proceeded to the Chandannagar camp from where they would go to Pakistan in a matter of days. For sometime, he toys with the idea of keeping her back, but then realizes that this is not
possible. However, when he comes to know that the train that will carry her to Pakistan will be attacked, he goes mad. He just cannot allow that to happen, and he decides that if he cannot keep Haseena back, he will at least not let her die.

Jugga is in a desperate state, and it is in such a frame of mind that he conceives his conspiracy in which Jugga becomes the sacrificial Pawn. Hukum Chand’s Plan succeeds, and both Haseena and Nooran it is hoped are saved, since they are in the train carrying Muslim refugees to Pakistan.

Critics have interpreted the ending of the novel differently. M.K. Naik, for instance, find “the conventionally romantic motif of the love of Jugga, the Sikh village gangster, for (of course) a Muslim girl, in saving whom he duly sacrifices his life to be a ‘flaw’ in the novel”, and impatient with the depiction of such inter-religious romances, asks: “why must Hindu heroes of Partition novels fall, with monotonous regularity, in love with Muslim girls alone?”

S. Kaul, on the other hand, is of the opinion that Jugga’s sacrifice at the end is just not “an act of individual heroism’, because in addition to saving Muslim alive, it brings back order and humanity to a village swept away by the flood of Patrioidal
violence sweeping over the Punjab’. According to him, Singh seems to say that ‘if the trains can be allowed to run as scheduled, much more than the lives of its passengers will have been saved.’

II

Manohar Malgonkar’s *A Bend in the Ganges* has not received the full measure of critical attention that he rightfully deserves as a significant Indian novelist in English. In fact, as A. Padmanabhan laments in the ‘Introduction’ to her book on Malgonkar,

“Branded as an entertainer and story-teller, the deeper qualities of his fiction have been neglected or unperceived by many. There are only two full-length studies on his fiction by academic critics, namely, G.S. Amur and James Y. Dayananda. N.S. Pradhan takes up only one of the novels-*A Bend in the Ganges* – for a detailed analysis. H.M. Williams too does not make a sustained study of Malgonkar’s fiction … The general tendency in the sixties and seventies was to dismiss him in a hasty pell-mell fashion. It is only the eighties and nineties that he slowly, though partially, emerged from neglect and under-rating.”
Among Malgonkar’s own novels, however, *A Bend in the Ganges* happens to be the ‘most discussed’ work and an interesting thing about this novel is that it has all the deals with the Partition of the Indian subcontinent. In fact, the Partition and the riots before and after it figure prominently in two of his previous novels, *Distant Drum* and *The Princess*, as well. But the uniqueness of *A Bend in the Ganges*, as a Partition novel, his in the fact that here he portrays the growth of communalism during the closing decades of British rule in India.

Malgonkar also wrote about the first Indian war of independence of 1857 in *The Devil’s Wind*. Thus, he displays his great fascination for Indian history right from the Great Revolt to the post-independence era. This interest in politics has perhaps something to do with Malgonkar’s professional life as soldier. Malgonkar served in the British Indian Army from 1942 to 1952, when he travelled widely in Nepal, Indo-China, Malaya and Western Europe, including England. That this rich experience of his as a soldier in a whole decade of active service (which also happened to be a momentous time of world history) was a clear source of inspiration for his novels is evident from a statement that he made in an interview given to James Y. Dayananada: “...
some aspect of politics and all that I have gone through – like our troubles with the English, for instance – I have experienced them myself. So, to that extent, it has given me some sort of capital to draw on.”

A Bend in the Ganges depicts the Second World War. His aim is, however, not simply to faithfully depict a war that changed the world, but rather to investigate the various strands of the nationalist movement in India. There are two fundamental questions central to the novel that the author explores at great length: first, whether Hindus and Muslims could ever be really united; and second, whether non-violence could be a plausible and practical way of life. These questions are worked out, and the documentation of the times is embodied through the narrative strategy of the employment of double-heroes who represent two opposing political ideologies – revolutionary terrorism and non-violence, respectively. These protagonists are Debi Dayal, the committed revolutionary terrorist, and Gian Talwar, the Professed follower of Gandhi and they both are directly involved in political action. It is through the contrasting responses of these two figures to the political upheaval of the times that the author seems to build up a debate as to which ideology was more suited
for tracking the immense complexities of the freedom struggle, as also the anomalies that underlay the Hindu-Muslim question.

Malgonkar adopts double hero or pluralistic method. The employment of double heroes; and through them, pitting two opposing political ideologies against each other – are new in this genre of fiction. Commenting on the first, A. Padmanabhan says: Instead of the usual single protagonist of Malgonkar’s earlier novels – Kiran Garud in *Distant Drum*, Henry Winton in *Combat of Shadows* and Abhay Raj in *The Princess*. In *A Bend in the Ganges*, there is the device of the double-hero, chosen from different social backgrounds indeed, apart from Malgonkar; no other English novelist of the Partition has used this device yet.

The aspect which really distinguishes *A Bend in the Ganges* is that contrary to the monolithic approach of most novels dealing with India’s freedom struggle, Malgonkar’s novel show ‘a plurastic method’ in the depiction of Polities. Indeed, Malgonkar is perhaps the only novelist to give importance to the terrorist movement of the 1930s; and while he concedes that Gandhi won freedom for India, there is a thorough questioning in *A Bend in the Ganges* of the validity of ‘ahimsa’ or non-violence. This deviation in his depiction of the diverse strands in the nationalist
struggle is Malgonkar’s unique contribution to the genre of Partition fiction.

An interesting point about the thematic concerns of Malgonkar’s novel is that they negate a cherished assumption of post-colonial theory, the notion that the post-colonial literature mostly has resistance to the excolonizer as their theme. Malgonkar’s novel, it will be seen, is manifestly more inward-looking than outwardly protest oriented. Instead of hitting out against the British oppressors, it explores the socio-political dynamics of Indian society with special focus on the two contending communities, the Hindus and the Muslims.

The novel, *A Bend in the Ganges* questions why the Partition took place in the first place and asks whether it is simply because of the divide and rule policy of the British, or whether there were also inherent (through invisible) fissures and fault lines in the very structure of Indian society that made the Partition possible.

In asking these issues, Malgonkar may indeed be seen as anticipating the stance of recent historians like Ayesha Jalal and Sugata Bose who suggest in their work, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy*, that,
There is now overwhelming evidence to suggest that regardless of whether Muslims were in fact a ‘nation’, let alone one created by British policy of divide and rule, it was the contradictions and structural peculiarities of Indian society and polities in late colonial India which eventually led to the creation of Pakistan.\textsuperscript{31}

In keeping with the trend of this opinion, the omniscient narrator of the novel reflects:

\textit{Religious differences among the races of India were the root cause of the country’s slavery, and the British had learnt to take the fullest advantage of these differences, playing the Hindus against the Muslims and the Sikhs against both.} \textsuperscript{32}

The result was fundamentalism which grew in strength even as the nationalist movement gained momentum. Two episodes in the novel—one near the beginning and the other towards the end—effectively sum up the trajectory of the communal question in India in the three final decades before Independence.

The first of these episodes takes place in Chapter VIII of the novel, where we meet the terrorist group ‘Freedom Fighters’ (of which Debi is an active member) for the first time; and find Debi’s
leader, Shafi Usman, categorically declaring, ‘The only saving grace of the Nationalist movement is gone, it is no longer united, no longer secular? As the novel shows, it was as early as in 1929 that Debi had begun to have misgivings.

Malgonkar indicates as well that Shafi Usman did have his reasons for feeling this way. Towards the end of the 1920s, a new rift had been created between the Hindus and the Muslims in India following the Congress and the League’s final parting of ways after the publication of the Nehru report in 1938. In the novel, Shafi’s leader, Hafiz, is shown writing to him from Bombay complaining about the callousness of the Hindus towards the Muslims, suggesting that they should re-orientate their activities.

Malgonkar’s representation of these two episodes indicates his ideas about the progressive deterioration of the communal situation in India in the phase between 1919 and 1945, from the Hindu-Muslim communities merely harbouring suspicion about each other to being avowed enemies, waiting to exterminate each other. Such feelings, he implies, were the root cause underlying the event of the Partition, and as he shows it in his novel, the worst part was that nobody could remain unaffected by it. As the narrator says:
Every citizen was caught up in the Holocaust. No one could remain aloof; no one could be trusted to be impartial … The administration, the police, even the armed, where caught up in the base of hatred. Willy-nilly everyone had come to be a partitipant in what was, in effect, a civil war … a war fought in every village and town and city where the two communities came upon each other.\textsuperscript{35}

At the end of the novel, in Chapter 34 (‘The Anatomy of Partition’), we find Debi Dayal’s father, Teckchand, the richest and most renowned man in Duriabad, bitter and raging at the turn of events:

After a life time spent in this part of India, in this town... This is my city, as much as that of its most respected Muslim families ... And suddenly someone has decided that this land which is mine should be foreign territory – just like that! And merely because some hooligaus take it into their heads to drive all the Hindus away from their land, I have to leave everything and go, pulled out by the roots, abandoning everything that has become a part of me.\textsuperscript{36}

Malgonkar’s delineation of the so-called ‘Hindu-Muslim question’ in \textit{A Bend in the Ganges} is both sensitive and thought-
proviking. But the most anestig feature of the novel lies elsewhere. One of the most ironic aspects of the Indian anticolonial struggle against the British was the fundamentalism grew even as the nationalist movement gained momentum in the years before Independence. It is this parallel development that Malgonkar traces with much dexterity in the novel. He does this by his in-depth analysis (through his double heroes) of the relative strengths and weakness of the opposing ideologies of revolutionary terrorism and non-violence.

Malgonkar’s narrative, interestingly, also starts roughly at the end of the 1920s, beginning with the Civil Disobedience Movement of the early 1930s and ending with the post-Partition riots in the Punjab. Between these two poles all the excitement of two decades are packed in the novel: the boycott of foreign goods; the secret activities of terrorist groups; the outbreak of the Second World War; the Japanese occupation of the Andamans; the British retreat from Rangoon; the long march of evacuees from Burma; Bombay dock explosion; the dismemberment of India. These political events in fact shape the plot of the novel. Malgonkar shows his protagonists as directly involved in each of the events enumerated above, in some way or the other. Their
lives are drived by these stupendous happenings which just carry them along.

Quite early in the novel, we find both Debi and Gian being convicted (though for different reasons) and deported to the Andamans by the British. Yet their lives follow a very different trajectory after they reach the island. While Gian is a favourite with the officials in the Cellular Jail, Debi becomes the hero of the convicts because of his pride and uncompromising attitude even in the face of torture. When the Japanese occupy the Andamans, he becomes the spokesperson of the convicts and deals with the Japanese Colonel Yanaki on their behalf. Yamaki inducts him into the Japanese Indian Army (most of which was comprised of prisoners of war), and he land in Rangoon soon after. However, following the British evacuation there, he lands in Assam and gets a job as an assistant stockman of the Silent Hill tea garden. At the end of the war and after a period of intense restlessness, he leaves Assam and comes down to Calcutta to meet his former terrorist friend Base. Gian, on the other hand, had never been concerned about the fate of his country. He just wanted to settle down to a quiet family life in the Andamans. That does not happen; and at the time of the Japanese
occupation, he escapes from the island and reaches Madras, and with the help of a calculated strategy and as job in Bombay.

Thus as Malgonkar shows it both the protagonists live through the same historical events differently. As the novelist has drawn them, Debi Dayal is a committed revolutionary while Gian accepts Gandhi’s philosophy. Through them, Malgonkar focuses on certain key issues that lay at the heart of the ideological clash between Gandhi’s satyagrahis and the revolutionary terrorists of the day. The doctrine of non-violence and all that it stand, is very eloquently summed up in the words Nehru is made to speak in the very first chapter of the novel (‘A Ceremony of Purification’) where Gian attends a meeting where Gandhi and Nehru has come:

We are all soldiers. Soldiers in the army of liberation...

But we are a new kind of a soldier. Our weapons are truth and non-violence. Ours shall be fought only by peaceful means. Gandhi has shows us the path. But make no mistake; our violence is the non-violence of the brave, arising not from cowardice but for courage, demanding great sacrifices than ordinary fighting men are called upon to make.37
In the course of this speech, Nehru at least acknowledge that the terrorists are also patriots-albeit of a different kind – even though he makes it clear that they have no place in the ‘army of liberation’ as represented in the novel by Shafi Usman, Debi’s leader and mentor, are deeply countemptuous of Gandhi and his followers and condemn them outright. At the end of Chapter – 2, (‘The Green Flash at Sunset) Shafi frustrated that he could not induct the shy village boy and Debi’s college mate, Gian (who professes to be a Gandhian) into their terrorist organization, says:

*College boys fall more easily for Gandhi’s type of movement, it is much more face-saving. They shelter their cowardice behind the tenets of non-violence, and refuse to rouse themselves to any form of positive action.*

If we are to judge the strength of the two movements through the characters who represent them in the novel, then revolutionary terrorism wins; atleast, initially. Debi Dayal comes across as a true hero, since he is totally dedicated to his cause, has faith in his convictions, and is uncompromising. Gian, on the other hand, is shown to falter. And that he is himself aware of
this is shown in Chapter 14 (‘Beyond the Black Water’), where he ruminates:

Wast it his youth that made him so shallow, he condered, or was it a part of the Indian character itself? Did he in some way represent the average Indian mixed up, shallow and weak? ...why could he not be like Debi Dayal, who held on to his beliefs with unswering rigidity? 39

Interestingly, Gian’s assessment of himself is the same as Debi’s opinion of him as expressed in Chapter 16 (‘The View from Debi’s Cell’) of the novel – “He (Gian) was typical of the youth of India, vacillating, always seeking new anchors, new directions, devoid of any basic convictions” 40

Yet it would be unfair to condemn Gian in such unequivocal terms. True, he was convicted of murder after he declared himself to be a follower of Gandhi, but we know that he was not very sure about his actual response to non-violence, and given what happened in his family, he perhaps could not help doing what he did. In Gian’s family, a long standing family fend centering on rare plot of land named pioloda was brought to an abrupt end by Gian when he killed his uncle Vishnu – Dutt to revenge his brother Hari’s death at the hands of the latter which he had been
unable to prevent. The incident of murder happened just days after Gian’s uneasy embrace of ahimsa when he had come home for a holiday. The time-gap between Gian’s embracing non-violence and his homecoming was not a long one. In this novel, Malgonkar very effectively shows man’s natural propensity to violence and what it is capable of once it is unleashed. In this context, it may be rememberd that Shafi’s strange prophesy at the beginning of the novel that ‘a million shall die, a million’ turns out to be true, but Gian’s promise that he shall never indulge in violence is not kept. As Malgonkar paints him, Debi is totally disillusioned, and only after this comes a new understanding and respect for Gandhi and his philosophy. For the first time in his life, he finds that he cannot dismiss the Indian National Congress and non-violence straight away. It is interesting to note that the novel’s plot shows Debi’s views changing with the changing fate of the British in the war.

As Malgonkar shows, Debi is not only restless when he returns to India after six years, but is also clearly confused. He does not know what is right or wrong, and feels the need to talk it out with someone. Thus (as has been mentioned earlier in this chapter), Debi goes and meets his old comrade Bose in Calcutta;
and Bose, to some extent, clears the cobwebs from his mind and also gives him a fresh perspective on things. He informs Debi that after his wife’s face got seared by an acid bulb thrown by a Muslim hooligan in a riot; he felt the need to join the Hindu Mahasabha and had come to believe that,

_We have to become aligned in sheer self-defence. Hindus against Muslims... (because) what had been aimed against the British has turned against itself. And the ugliest thing it has bred is distrust. No Hindu can trust a Muslim anymore, and no Muslim trusts a Hindu._\(^{41}\)

Debi shunks at the thought of civil war and quite surprisingly (for a man of his inclinations) remarks: ‘It almost makes one think that non-violence is perhaps the only answer? But Buse springs to be offensive and believes:

_What is the future for a country nurtured on non-violence in a world of mounting violence? ...can a non-violent nation have a violent army ... a navy?_\(^{42}\)

The inefficacy of non-violence as an all-embracing philosophy of life (which is the basis of Bose’s argument) had become quite apparent by 1946. Very few Indians seemed to set store by it anymore.\(^{43}\)
In the next chapter, chapter 31 (‘To Fold a leaf’), we find Shafi Usman thinking just to observe of what Bose had said in the previous chapter. For Shafi, the Ram-Rahim club, the partaking of a beef and porkdish, belonged to an uneasy past. He had not become convinced that there was no possibility of the,

*Hindus and Muslims living together... That was what the trial spell of provincial government had demonstrated. For the Muslims, independence was worth nothing unless it also ensured freedom from the domination of the Hindus. They would never live in an Indian where they were only a tolerated minority.*

Incidentally, this idea of Shafi’s the innate fear of the Muslims that the British Raj would inevitably be succeeded by a Hindu Raj which would only spell cloom for them is echoed in many other books. In *A Bend in the Ganges*, however, Malgonkar shows the insecurity of both the Hindus and the Muslims. As A. Padmanabhan has rightly pointed out:

*Thus, the Hanuman 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, with Bose representing the Hindus, Shafi, the Muslim, and Debi and embarrassed observer in between.45

Bose and Shafi, once revolutionary terrorists, are thus transformed right on the verge of freedom into Hindu and Muslim fundamentalists, respectively.

A Bend in the Ganges records the transformation of Revolutionary Terrorism into Fundamentalism and shows how a historic non-violent struggle against an imperical power ironically gave way to unprecedented communal violence and savagery. Debi at one point asks Bose a very pertinent question: “Do you think the congress movement has been just as much of a failure as ours?” to which Bose replies, ‘It is an even greater failure?

Perhaps it was so. Revolutionary terrorism as a whole had a very short life and was easily terminated by the British. One of the reasons that it could not survive, according to the historian Bipan Chandra, was because, ‘above all their was not the polities of a mass movement... they could not establish contact with the masses.”46 But the most profoundly ironic and tragic turning came with Gandhi’s non-violent movement, which, after having enjoyed decades of success as a mass movement, suddenly seemed to turn on its head.
Just three days prior to Independence (and his own death at the hands of Muslims) – on 12 August 1947 – Debi ruminated.

*Would terrorism have won freedom at a cheaper price and somehow still kept the Hindus and Muslims together? Perhaps not, but at least it would have been an honest sacrifice, honest and manly – not something that had sneaked upon them in the garb of non-violence.*

This is a very poignant statement, and one gets the feeling that like Debi, the author felt the same.

What indeed comes across most forcefully in a careful reading of *A Bend in the Ganges*, is the author’s pre-occupation with the ‘whys’ of the Partition. As an amateur historian, Malgonkar was less interested in the specific happening that was the Partition than in examining the ideational fault lines that lay concealed under the event. The novel thus delineates with insight, penetration and utter analytic precision the uneasy transformation of a colonized country into a sovereign state, the difficult passage from the familiar shackles of bondage to the disturbing challenges of freedom.

As has been already stated, *A Bend in the Ganges* is not the first historical novel that Malgonkar wrote. His ability to handle
his historical subjects with consummate skill had been proved first with *The Princess* and then again with *The Devil’s Wind*. In these novels, he not only successfully blended the perception of the historian with the imagination of the novelists, but also achieved a documentary authenticity that is virtually unparalleled in the whole genre of Indian – English fiction. His achievement in *A Bend in the Ganges*, however, lies in another direction. In this novel, as Shankar Bhattacharya rightly points out, Malgonkar “successfully combined narrative and analysis in a manner in which analysis does not interrupt to violate the texture of the narrative, nor does the narrative overwhelm analysis?”

It is perhaps this technical skill of Malgonkar as a novelist that his contemporaries the novelists like Khushwant Singh and R.K. Narayan, had in mind when they praised him later.

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