CHAPTER - III

ANATOMY OF PARTITION
Malgonkar’s *A Band in the Ganges* is his most ambitious novel. It has received adequate critical attention because it deals with a bloody chapter in our History. Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* and Chaman Nahal’s *Asadi* also converge on the same period. These novels may be called Partition Novels. But what is usually forgotten in the discussion of these novels is their narrative mode and stylistic specificity. Any reader can say that the violence and the sense of Human destruction these novels convey, are terrific. But one need not think of reading a novel just for the purpose of knowing what happened during the partition days. Let us, for example, analyse the following passage.

As a background to this great, two-way migration, religious civil war was being waged all over the country; a war fought in every village and town and city where the two communities came upon each another. The most barbaric cruelties of primitive men prevailed over all other human attributes.
The administration had collapsed, the railways had stopped functioning because the officials and the technicians had themselves joined the mass migrations. Mobs ruled the streets, burning, looting, killing, dishonouring women and mutilating children; even animals sacred to the other community became the legitimate targets of reprisals.

Isolated from its context, the passage reads like any good news paper report. But if one reads it in its creative context, it suggests the diabolic milieu that saturates the activities of Debi-Dayal, Gian Talwar and Shafi who betrays Debi-Dayal. From the point of view of assessing the efficacy of Malgonkar's art as an Entertainer, we have to focus our attention on the evolution of the plot in the novel. The novel has two heroes, but it is Debi-Dayal that seems to dominate the action. He not only dominates the action but also exemplifies the ethic that characterises the approach of tough revolution. But what is more significant is the 'Peripetia' we notice not only in the action but also in Debi-Dayal. We shall clarify this point at the

Debi-Dyal had always wanted to be a strong man; not muscle-bound or broad-chested, but quick and wiry and able to hit hard, an adept at Judo, that ancient art of the Samurai which was said to be so much superior to the wrestling of India and the boxing of the West.²

His ambition has been, "to prove himself, to match his precious skill against a real-life adversary, so that he could maim with a spine-breaking guillotine-chop, or break an arm with the hold known as the elbow-twist, or emasculate a man for life by administering a scrotum-kick."³

Debi-Dyal’s sense of his own importance is also sustained by his family background. He is the only son of a landlord and a business magnet, Diwan Bahadur Tek Chand Kerwad. From start to finish Gian is very much aware that he is a misfit in the company of Debi-Dyal and his friends. As a follower of Gandhi, he fails to make sense

² *A Bend in the Ganges*, p. 68.
of the revolutionary seal of Debi's followers. Apart from the ideological difference between the two, Gian is aware of a more deep difference between them. He thinks that the gap between the world he secretly longed for and the world he fitted into was wide enough, but, by the standards of his particular background, it was a rare achievement for him to be at college at all. For the likes of him, it was enough that they were at college - it cost every bit of a hundred rupees a month to keep him there; and it would have been impossible unless his brother Hari had given up the most elementary comforts of middle-class life.4

The politics of his own village involve Gian in Ungandhian situation. Submitting to the emotional compulsion he kills Vishnu Dutt who was responsible for the murder of his brother, Hari. The deft and shrewd moves within the plot are such that the two friends Debi and Gian are brought together as life prisoners in the Andamans. But it is here one can see the difference between the two.

4 A Band in the Ganges, p. 23.
Inspite of an unforeseen lapse in adhering to the Gandhian Code, Gian considers himself a Gandhian. Debi on the other hand could not adjust himself to the conditions of prison life. The insolence of the sentries and other prison officials irritates him. He tries to escape from the Andamans but doesn’t succeed. The Japanese invasion helps him to escape from the prison. Although he joins hands with the Japanese, their views and behaviour make him uneasy. The following passage gives us an inside view of Debi–Deyal’s thinking:

They wanted to soften up the country, to prevent a British build-up. The traffic in the estuary of two Asia’s greatest rivers was entirely based on the paddle boats and canoes of the villagers. The riverside villages were almost amphibian. Destruction of the boats could paralyse their life.

Blowing up a bridge or destroying an aeroplane were somehow different; his mind shrank from the idea of causing havoc among the poor Bengal villagers, reducing them to starvation to let the Japanese march into India.5

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It had been like a turning in the road. He could never become a part of that particular form of degradation. He could understand Mulligan, and he could understand Yamaki. In a way, he could even understand Shafi. What could one make of the Brigadier?  

The above citations not only reveal the structure of Debi's thinking but help the development of the plot. Shafi, the leader of the revolutionary movement, betrays Debi. He is responsible for the capture, trial and transportation of Debi to the Andamans. It is in his efforts to escape from the clutches of the Japanese that Debi finds himself in Bengal which was torn by the bloody feud between the two rival communities. In Calcutta Debi meets his friend Basu and with his help locates the place of Shafi's hiding. Shafi is now a part of the Muslim League which clamoured for a separate Muslim State. 

Shafi was a frequent visitor to a disreputable place in Calcutta where he had a girl, Mustas by name. 

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6 A Bend in the Ganges, p. 265.
Having had the information that Shafi was fond of Mantas, Debi Dayal was determined to frustrate his betrayer in his private affairs. He was confident that Shafi would be afraid to start a row because he was also under police vigilance. Tempting Akkaji (the Mistress of the House) with a bundle of hundred rupee notes, he makes her surrender Mantas to him. In the very presence of Shafi, he took Mantas out of the house. But in the darkness, Shafi hurls a glassy object aiming it at Mantas's face. In order to rescue her from the bulb that contained acid, Debi hurts his palm and forearm. One of the significant turns we notice in the plot is Debi's softening attitude and Mantas's love that makes him more human than he wishes to be.

In Lahore, Debi's father faces a number of problems. His daughter returns home after an unsuccessful marriage. The violence generated by religious and political conflicts reach horrible proportions. In the meanwhile Gian joins them, but fails to be of much use to the family in despair.

Shafi attacks along with other religious fanatics, Tek Chand's Estate and gets killed by the manly act of Sunder. The family is on the move towards Delhi. Debi—
Dayal in his anxiety to join the family boards a train along with Mantas and becomes a victim of the fanatical violence.

The above summary of the plot-lines in the novel and the tragic end of Obei-Dayal are articulated in a style which has verve and vividness. Consider for example the following passage:

Even as he was turning, Gian hurled the Shiva at him from where he stood. It caught him squarely on the side and made him stagger at its impact. And then Gian made a dive for Hamid who had struggled to his feet, but he eluded him and made a bolt for the door. As Gian went racing after him, he saw Sundari pick up the Shiva he had flung at Shafi. At the head of the stairs, he gave up the chase and turned back.

The sight that met his eyes made him stand still for a moment, feeling numb, his knees wobbly. Shafi was wriggling on the floor, shielding his head with his hands, and Sundari stood above him, the Shiva from the Little House in her hands. Even as he was looking, he saw her bring it down on Shafi's head, and then,

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7 *A Band in the Ganges*, p. 379.
when the man rolled forward and lay limp on the carpet, he saw her bring it down again and again, as though killing a scorpion or a spider, crashing in the dead man's skull until it cracked open and blood and brains spurted out in a red and white mess.

The scorpion and spider images coupled with "crashing," "cracked," "blood," "brains," "spurted," "red" and "white" make the passage exciting and dramatic. Or for example the entire chapter 34, the 'Anatomy of partition' is a skilful interweaving of remarkable insights on fanaticism, political expediency human-relationships and familial bond. The following passage illustrates the point:

He felt sick with emotion. His duty lay with his wife and daughter; they had to have a man to look after them, and that man was now himself. If Debi-dayal had been with them now, he would have thought seriously of staying behind, confident that Debi would be able to deal much more adequately with the present situation. Debi would have accepted the

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7 A Bend in the Ganges, p. 379.
challenge, revelled in it. 

In fine, the novel is a balanced fusion of exciting narrative elements like Karati fights, Murder, mass-murder, emotional involvement, deep feeling, and appropriate and contextually relevant authorial comment. Moreover, one cannot miss the irony involved in the situation the novel dramatises. The epigraph which prefaces the novel suggests this unmistakably. The epigraph suggests Gandhiji's doubts and fears about the practice of Non-violence as a socio-political ethic.

Keeping the narrative at the level of action and analysing that action within the frame work of a serious and time honoured ideology, Malgonkar as an Entertainer makes the novel a triumph of his craftsmanship. K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar writes,

No doubt it needs a Tolstoy, if not indeed a Vyasa, to tell the whole unvarnished story of United India breaking up into two, experiencing the terrific convulsions of unimaginable fratricidal

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*A Bend in the Ganges*, p. 339.
strife. Malgonkar's model, however, is neither the Mahabharata nor War and Peace. He aims, not at exhausting the subject with an overwhelming mass of detail, but at the random sampling of something of the horror of the event - the horror, the pity and the futility. 9

One can hardly disagree with the assessment embodied in the preceding citation. But one may go further and say that the horror, pity and futility are brought home to the reader not in the style of an epic poet, but as a novelist whose technique discovers the subject or the theme.