Chapter II

The Pinnacle of Inhumanity

The second chapter is devoted to a detailed discussion on Khushwant Singh’s first novel *Train to Pakistan*. The explication of the novel is to show the historical backdrop against which the gripping drama of passionate love story is presented. In the process, the typical social life of the rural population of the times comes out unobtrusively. The tiny village -- Mano Majra -- where the action takes place is symbolically a microcosm of rural life. The people of the hamlet, professing different religious faiths, live in harmony and are unaware of the freedom struggle. The analysis also highlights how the story documents the horrendous impact of the division of the Indian sub-continent into two nations. It also discusses the artistic devices used by novelist to portray the powerful drama of human vendetta and massacre instigated by religious bigots.

In this novel, Khushwant Singh fuses history and fiction in a unique manner. Portraying characters and incidents that are fictional, he makes his novel an exact replica of the history of the days, which were among the most traumatic in the history of India. Partition of the country into two lands, India and Pakistan, led to the most inhuman acts ever dreamt of anywhere in the world. Thousands of people were killed, maimed and raped for no crime other than being born in a particular religion. All these sordid facts, the turbulence that prevailed and the half-hearted steps taken by the authorities to stem the tide have all been faithfully recorded by Khushwant Singh in this epoch-making work.

The novel opens with a bird’s eye view of the burning cauldron that was India in 1947. Even the summer, according to the novel, has a different feel in India that
year, being hotter, drier and dustier than usual. People were attributing it to the nemesis for the sins they had committed as a consequence of the division of the country into Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan, for unprecedented communal riots had been generated in Calcutta and they spread like wild fire in all directions.

…… and within a few months the death toll had mounted to several thousands. Muslims said the Hindus had planned and started the killing. According to the Hindus, Muslims were to blame. The fact is both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured. Both raped . . . Hundreds and thousands of Hindus and Sikhs who had lived for centuries on the Northwest Frontier abandoned their homes and fled towards the protection of the predominantly Sikh and Hindu communities in the east …. 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 (TTP 1-2).

Having admirably caught the atmosphere of those horrid days in a few deft, but emotionally charged phrases, Khushwant Singh goes on to point out that amidst all this dance of terror, there did exist a scatter of tiny villages, which he aptly terms “oases of peace” (1-2). It could be observed that the way in which Mano Majra, an abode of peace, is introduced through a maze of horror, is an excellent example of history presented with utmost artistry. Having introduced the village with its character, the author goes on to describe the composition of the place. There are only three brick buildings there, two of them being places of worship, the Sikh temple and the mosque, the third one belonging to a lone Hindu, a money lender. Sikhs and Muslims live there in almost equal numbers, the former owning the land, and the latter toiling in them. All of them occupy mud huts. The author goes on to give such
elaborate details to emphasize the fact that the villagers had been a contented lot, having had no ambitions, and, probably on that account, having been free from any animosity. There is yet another significant fact Khushwant Singh mentions. When people of Mano Majra, irrespective of their religious leanings, have any special need for divine blessing, they go neither to the mosque nor to the temple, but to the local deity, which is no more than a three-foot slab of sandstone. The author’s purpose in mentioning that is to emphasize the fact that for the village folk, religion is but skin deep and they unite as human beings when it comes to the question of divine quest. They are united under one banner though they lack the courage to own it publicly.

The novelist takes enormous pains to introduce the scene of action in all its ramifications including the daily routines of its occupants, men, women, beasts and birds, and the way in which all its actions are tuned to the movement of the trains, though the station by itself is insignificant, being no more than a little dot in the railway map. The villagers keep moving in the same rut, formed by decades, or even centuries, of leisurely movement, putting their faith in providence. Even the call of the mullah at the mosque immediately followed by the priest at the Sikh temple is prompted by the whistle of the Lahore Mail.

On the whole, the people of Mano Majra are a contented lot, leading a peaceful existence, with nothing to distract them from their daily routine. They are hardly aware of the goings on outside the village. The extent of their exposure to and their knowledge of the outside world is succinctly referred to by the Sub-inspector when he says, “I am sure that no one in Mano Majra even knows that the British have left and the country is divided into Pakistan and Hindustan. Some of them know about Gandhi but I doubt if anyone has ever heard of Jinnah. (24).
What Khushwant Singh attempts here, in the description of Mano Majra and its people, is to record the fact that there were still a few villages in the border regions of the Punjab and Bengal which were havens of peace, despite their populace being constituted of Hindus and Muslims. Politics had not penetrated there. People there were hardly aware of a vigorous struggle for freeing India from the British rule going on in all the parts of the country. Many had no idea of what freedom meant. There being no change whatsoever in the humdrum routine of their daily life, they were not aware of the change of guard in Delhi. Many places in India took almost a decade to understand that the British, had, after all, quit India.

Like Mano Majra, there were many villages throughout India which had a railway station or which was in the control of train whistles. They somehow tuned themselves to the arrival, departure or passing through of trains since clocks were unheard of. In all this description of Mano Majra, Khushwant Singh is historically accurate and as a novelist, he puts them in an artistic fashion. The passage where he mentions the passing of the trains triggering one or the other of the actions of the village captures our attention, because it brings out one section of rural India as it existed in those days, with train whistles keeping time for them.

The first incident of this novel whose purpose is to bring out the travails in human life caused by partition, however, has nothing to do with it. It is a dacoity carried on by a gang of five professional robbers. In fact, the first of the four-part novel is titled ‘Dacoity’. Through this part, the novelist delineates the personality of the place, Mano Majra, through a variety of incidents. He also introduces the main characters of the novel in their strong, as well as, weak moments.

The dacoity itself has been described in graphic detail. Four of the dacoits are armed and the other one carries a torch. They have already selected the target and are
cautiously making their way towards it. It is the brick building owned by Lala Ram Lal, the money lender. They hide their faces as much as they can, though it is a futile exercise in such a place like Mano Majra. When they bang on the door, the women, who had already got a forewarning of danger through the barking of dogs, try in vain to put them off, saying that Lala was out of station.

Undeterred by such childish tricks, the robbers force themselves in, reach Ram Lal’s hiding place upstairs and when he refuses to hand them over the key to the safe in spite of their thrashing, they kill him in exasperation, and run away with the jewelry and money they have collected. The vain attempts of the women to put the robbers off the scent, the pathetic attempts of Ram Lal to save his money are portrayed in a graphic manner and add realism to the narrative. The author makes us understand that these were everyday occurrences in the India of those days. When the womenfolk shout for help, no one stirs out of their residences, since they know the ruthlessness of the robbers. If everyone in the place can easily find out who the robbers are, it is because they are professionals known to the police, and because they have been going about their job with a predictable regularity.

Yet, there is one member of the gang who refuses to take part in this particular venture. He is Juggut Singh, popularly known as Jugga, a known delinquent who has been arrested and punished many times. The robbers do not like this attitude of his and they show their contempt for him by throwing two sets of glass bangles inside his house, so as to question his manliness. The surest way of provoking a man, however big or small he might be, is to question his manliness. But even these bangles fail to provoke Jugga, because he is convinced that his desertion of his gang in this particular venture is right. This peculiar trait to be found in villagers is described by Meet Singh to Iqbal.
Perverted as it is, it is the accepted ethics among the Punjabis. It is elaborated by Meet Singh, who is under the impression that Juggut Singh has taken part in the dacoity and murder. No doubt, according to the priest, Jugga has it in his blood, his father and grandfather having been dacoits who met their death on the gallows. Yet, they never committed any robbery in their own village. Juggut Singh, on the other hand, has disgraced his family by murdering one who belongs to his own village, says Meet Singh.

The author offers his own comments on this Punjabi moral code through the thoughts of Iqbal:

For them truth, honor, financial integrity were ‘all right’, but these were placed lower down the scale of values than being true to one’s salt, to one’s friends and fellow villagers. For friends you could lie in court or cheat, and no one would blame you. On the contrary, you became a nar admi - a..... he-man who had defied authority (magistrate and police) and religion (oath on the scripture) but proved true to friendship … What bothered Meet Singh, a priest, was not that Jugga had committed a murder but that his hands had been soiled with the blood of a fellow villager. If Jugga had done the same thing in the neighboring village, Meet Singh would gladly have appeared in his defence and sworn on the holy Granth that Jugga had been praying in the gurdwara at the time of the murder”. (44).

Thus through fictionalized characters and imaginary incidents, Khushwant Singh brings out the peculiar ethical code of Punjab of those days. May be, it was perverted from the point of absolute standards but it stands the villagers in good stead. This ethical code helps them forge a strong bond among themselves – strong enough
to weather any storm. It keeps them united as Mano Majrans when the entire region around them is burning, literally.

Actually Juggut Singh was true to his self and refused to take part in the robbery and received bangles from the robbers as a mark of their contempt for him. When the robbery was being committed, he was courting his sweet heart Nooran, the beautiful daughter of a weaver, who also served as the mullah in the mosque. The flirting of the couple ends in sex, which the girl accepts, though with customary protests, for the fun of it. It is after the whole thing is over that they hear the gunshot of the robbers and the girl hurries home.

Khushwant Singh goes through this episode rather elaborately, registering every moment of the lovers. The most significant thing to be noticed in it is the fact that they belong to two different religions, which are at loggerheads with each other, but this hardly occurs to the lovers, who are passionately involved in their love making. The author has introduced this sub-plot in the novel to emphasize the fact that religion hardly matters to these folk who are living in tune with nature. It is as though all their thinking and feelings transcend the barriers of religion. One cannot even call it religious harmony because, for all practical purposes, religion does not exist in their lives. It is confined to the prayer time and there is nothing more to it. This episode is yet another example of the author’s fusing fiction and history in an artistic fashion, proving how consummate an artist he is.

There are two more important characters, important from the point of history, who are introduced to the readers before the dacoity. They are government servants, Hukum Chand, magistrate and deputy commissioner and the police sub-inspector. They are types with marked individual characteristics to add to the realism of the
narrative. Through them we come to know how the Indian government servants of the day conducted themselves and how the public behaved towards them.

Hours before the arrival of the magistrate, the workers at the government rest house are readying it to receive the distinguished guest. Every detail of the process is recorded for the reader to know how much care is taken in the process.

After a while, the sub-inspector arrives there in person, accompanied by two constables, to inspect the arrangements and satisfy himself. Then come two orderlies in white uniform with red sashes around their waist. On their turbans are white bands bearing the emblem of the government of Punjab. They are accompanied by non-official coolies carrying the baggage. All this is given in detail in order to enlighten the reader of the deference with which officials serving the British government were treated. Even the orderlies were supplied with uniforms that would instill awe in the onlookers.

The magistrate makes his appearance after an hour in his large American car. He waits until an orderly gets down and opens the rear door for him to come out. Even before he steps out, the sub-inspector and the constable stand to attention and salute him. The villagers - and this is important - move away to a respectful distance. It is after all this that the corpulent magistrate emerges out of his stately vehicle. He carries in his hand a tin of cigarettes, which was a status symbol in those days.

When he comes near the sub-inspector he gives him a friendly slap on his back, which is an act of condescension, and the sub-inspector knows it, since he does not shift from his attention mode. In this act and the attitude of condescension the magistrate apes his British bosses, whose way of appreciating servility in the Indian subordinates it is. Despite all pretentions to sophistication, the author points out,
Hukum Chand betrays his middle class origin in the way in which he smokes, drinks and eats. In every movement of theirs, both Hukum Chand and the sub-inspector, remind the readers of the way in which the Indian officers conducted themselves. Once they reached a notable position in the official hierarchy they started putting on airs and expecting and demanding overt signs of deference from their subordinates. The subordinates, on their part, practiced fawning as a fine art which they displayed in the presence of their superiors irrespective of their being black or white.

Once Hukum Chand settles down, he starts discussing business with the sub-inspector. The sub-inspector’s response to the casual query of his master is typical of the government servants of lower rank of the days: “God is merciful. We only pray for your kindness”. (20) A minute later the sub-inspector says that convoys of refugees have been coming from Pakistan and also going from India to Pakistan. Yet, he confirms there has been no incident in Mano Majra. Hukum Chand refers to arrival of trains from Pakistan carrying none but dead bodies. The Sikhs on the Indian side did not take it lying down, either. They retaliated by attacking a Muslim refugee train and sending it to Pakistan with more than a thousand dead bodies, with the inscription, “Gift to Pakistan” on the engine.

All these are historical facts. Such chilling incidents were every-day occurrences during those ominous days. Khushwant Singh presents them in an artistic manner, in the form of dialogue between two law enforcement officers. A trait which was common among all those who were serving the British government was their loyalty to their professions, irrespective of provocations. Hukum Chand is a deputy commissioner and magistrate and it was his duty to maintain law and order, which he discharged with as much loyalty, as he could muster. Of course, as it happens during
riots anywhere, there were many occasions when things got out of the hands of law enforcing agencies.

Duty and professionalism apart, what did they, the magistrate and the sub-inspector, feel about the goings on around them? The sub-inspector, a Hindu, feels strongly that retaliation in kind, man for man, woman for woman, child for child is the only way to stop killing in Pakistan. Unfortunately, he does not understand that in the case of frenzied mobs, such retaliation will lead only to more killings. Actually that is what happened in those days. Retaliation led to more retaliation and so on and so on endlessly, resulting in crores of murders. Perhaps it could not be helped. When one works up fury in one’s own self, he takes leave of all cool reasoning. Again, the sub-inspector is not happy with his own people, the Hindus, who, he says, are not playing the stabbing game. In the same breath, he is findings fault with the Sikhs. While the RSS boys are beating up Muslim gangs in all cities, the Sikhs have lost their manliness, though they talk big.

And in disapproving reference to Mano Majra and other pockets of peace, he says: “Here we are on the border with Muslims living in Sikh villages as if nothing has happened. Every morning and evening, the muezzin calls for prayer in the heart of a village like Mano Majra. You ask the Sikhs why they allow it and they answer that the Muslims are their brothers. I am sure they are getting money from them”. (21) The sub-inspector, in his exasperation, is unable to appreciate the fact that despite all the chaos, there could be innocent folk who refuse to get provoked, particularly since as per his own reckoning, they are not even aware of the partition. His anger does not stop there. He attributes a motive to the Sikhs. He feels that they do it for money.

Hukum Chand, does not believe in this theory. He points out that the Muslims are not at all well to do and hence could not have bribed. From that point, the
discussion turns towards collecting bribes. Unlike Mano Majra, Hukum Chand says, Chundunnugger is ‘a good' police station, since there have been many murders and much illicit distilling, and the Sikh peasants are prosperous. As a result, the police sub-inspectors have been able to collect money to build houses in the cities, with Hukum Chand indirectly suggesting that the present incumbent also could follow their footsteps. He assures him that he will not mind whatever he takes within reason. But there has been a change of government in Delhi. Hukum Chand is down to earth when he says, “This new government is talking very loudly of stamping out all this. After a few months in office their enthusiasm will cool and things will go on as before. It is no use trying to change things overnight” (21-22).

It is a very realistic portrayal of the days. Corruption was common during the British days and most of the government officials were not averse to accepting bribes in return for out of the way favors. The habit continued even after independence, though there was a short pause. This is what has been recorded here. The habit of accepting bribes is so deep rooted that the new government of independent India adopted it effortlessly.

Then starts the other engagement for the magistrate. As desired by him, the sub-inspector has arranged for a courtesan to be brought to the rest house for the pleasure of his superior. He has taken such a lot of care in choosing the girl that he assures the magistrate that if the girl was not up to his expectation, he could even be dismissed. Officers of higher rank had no qualms in making their subordinates serve as procurers and the subordinates had no shame in satisfying their masters.

The sordid affair between the greying Hukum Chand and the fifteen year old Haseena is described in detail. The magistrate bathes and dresses himself with utmost care for the occasion, consulting the mirror now and then. The party of four, two male
musicians, the mother of the girl and the girl herself, are brought in the magistrate’s American car. Hukum Chand chooses his favorite film songs and makes the girl sing them. The girl is a novice to the trade and watches every move of Hukum Chand with trepidation. The mother encourages her daughter to please the man and is apologetic to Hukum Chand for the girl’s bashfulness.

When Hukum Chand starts the game of love and makes a few preliminary moves, the shots of the robbery bring the whole affair to an abrupt end, to the relief of Haseena and disappointment of Hukum Chand. When compared to the passionate lovemaking of Jugga and Nooran, this affair is synthetic and insipid. The novelist purposely uses words like ‘uneasy’, ‘grinning’ and ‘lecherous’ for describing Hukum Chand’s state of mind. On the other side, the girl was stiff and frigid. “The magistrate was not concerned with her reactions. He had paid for all that”. (33).

How can there be any reactions in a girl who is more a child than a maiden? To his own disgust, Hukum Chand himself remembers that she is just as old as his daughter. This is a fictitious scene, beautifully portrayed, bringing out the officiousness and the lechery of the government official and the greed of the girl’s mother. What is the historicity?

The institution of professional courtesan dates back to somewhere in BCE. The profession, despite its being against accepted morality, carried its own respectability and dignity in ancient India. Many of them were dancers of exemplary order and musicians of a classical quality. In that way they were pride of a country and were asked to exhibit their artistic talent on important national occasions. But they were not supposed to get married and had to sponge on the royal family or gentry for their existence. As time went on, and petty chieftains and zamindars took the place of monarchs, the institution of courtesan too was devalued. Yet, a cheap variety of
them did exist, patronized by higher ups. They too could sing and dance, but their artistic talents were very much emaciated.

Those who were appointed in administrative posts just a rank below the ones occupied by the British behaved like feudal lords. Naturally they put on airs and conducted themselves like the zamindars of yore. Indeed, the common folk stood in awe of them, and often addressed them as ‘government’, just as Hukum Chand being addressed by the troupe of these musicians. The officials are expected to shower money on them, as repeatedly suggested by the girl’s mother. To her, Hukum Chand is the benign deity who would not mind suffocating her with his bounty. How does the officer find the money for it? Through bribes, of course, as Hukum Chand himself acknowledges.

One similarity between Juggut Singh’s love affair and Hukum Chand’s lustful attempt is that in both these cases the girls happen to be Muslims. In the case of Nooran, it never crosses her mind that her lover belongs to another religion. All she knows is that he is a well built youth, brimming with love, who can overpower her and also take her sentiments into account. In the case of Haseena, the man is chosen by her people and all that they want is a moneyed man who can pay them in wads of currency. His age, looks or station hardly matters. Whether he is a Hindu or Sikh is of little consequence to them. Yet another proof that religion is but skin deep in these folks.

All the incidents described above take place simultaneously and come to an abrupt end at the gunshot of the dacoits. After that the scene shifts to the railway station where a refugee train is arriving. Only a couple, a Sikh peasant and his wife carrying an infant get off, carrying meager luggage. Khushwant Singh says that when they went out of the gate, “they were lost in a tumult of greetings and embraces”. This
brief phrase is enough to reveal that the couple were refugees returning from Pakistan, that it called for a lot of good luck to come away unscathed from Pakistan, that a lot of people were eagerly awaiting the return of their own kith and kin from there and that such arrivals were always a matter for jubilation. Khushwant Singh proves that he is a master of brevity. Earlier, he has given a brief, but telling description of the refugee occupants. “When they (the trains) came, they were crowded with Sikh and Hindu refugees from Pakistan or with Muslims from India. People perched on the roofs with their legs dangling, or on bedsteads wedged in between the bogies. Some of them rode precariously on the buffers”. (34). In short, they were endangering their lives in their attempt to protect them. It was a risk worth taking, as they were all living on top of an erupting volcano.

Then is introduced another important player in the story, Iqbal, an outsider, an intruder, who has but little role to play in the main plot, but whose presence and actions throw a lot of light on the social milieu of the days. His looks, dress and bearing smack of alienness; he will not belong anywhere, in India. He irritates the station master, who takes him to be a well-to-do young man educated in England, undertaking to do rural uplift work. There were quite a few such men in those days. Some of them were sons of millionaires or sons of government officials. Some were known to be communist agents. Whatever his affiliations, philosophy or predilections might be, Iqbal was an unwelcome guest in Mano Majra, looked on with suspicion on account of his out of the way manners. Mano Majra was too raw for a sophisticated and westernized gentleman like him.

However, when he makes his way for the Sikh temple, he is welcomed warmly by Meet Singh and is shown a spare room where he can stay. He blows up his mattress and spreads it on the charpai, the only piece of furniture in the room. When
asked, he simply says, his name is Iqbal. Now, Iqbal is a name common to all religions and the young man does not choose to disclose his religion. The priest, without any further probing, takes him to be a Sikh and addresses him accordingly. The visitor, however, has no use for religion.

Iqbal explains, rather elaborately that he has been sent there by his party to do something to stop the bloodshed caused by the partition in the place which is a vital point for refugee movement. The priest, Meet Singh, is least interested in what he says and questions on other personal matters concerning him. To a query by Iqbal, Meet Singh says that sometimes the American padres come and he does not mind their preaching Christianity in the village. “Everyone is welcome to his religion”, he says broadmindedly. (39). He agrees when Iqbal tells him that the Europeans do not bother very much about religion. He adds to the conversation by saying that it is the reason for their living without morals. Iqbal counters him pointing out that the westerners do not tell lies and they are not corrupt and dishonest like Indians. Iqbal goes on lecturing on financial problems faced by the people, capitalist exploitation, rural indebtedness and so on, which does not interest Meet Singh. On the other hand, he is intently watching, with a bit of disgust, the young man eating tin fish with head, eyes and tail.

When the subject of Ram Lal’s murder is brought up, Iqbal is agitated. He seems to be rattled, eliciting a wry comment from the priest: “Why, Babu Sahib, you have come to stop killing and you are upset by one murder”? (41) Iqbal is certainly not the kind of hero he thinks he is. He talks socialism because it is the fashion of the day, all the while looking for a short cut to become a hero.

In the afternoon, when Iqbal is trying to get some sleep, he is reminded of the previous night he has spent in an overcrowded railway compartment full of Muslim
refugees making their way to Pakistan. It presents an opportunity to the author to paint a realistic picture of railway passengers of India, their insatiable inquisitiveness in particular. Thus one can notice that Khushwant Singh takes pains to portray the nature of the society, its strength and its weakness at every available opportunity, making his presentation of history as comprehensive as possible.

Then comes the scene when the village officer, lambardar, and the mullah of the mosque meet Iqbal in the gurdwara to welcome him, since he is a guest of the village. Iqbal comes back from his saunter through the village and lies down on his charpai, when Meet Singh comes to him with an offer of spinach. As usual, Iqbal politely declines it. Before meeting the visitors, who are unwelcome as far as Iqbal is concerned, he strengthens himself with a swig of whisky.

The lambardar, Banta Singh, is profusely apologetic for not having met the guest earlier, offers him a large tumbler of milk, assuring him that it was milked only an hour back and was properly boiled with a lot of sugar. He stirs the milk with his forefinger and picks up a slab of cream out of it in proof of its quality. Iqbal, as to be expected, is shocked beyond words, but keeps his cool so as not to offend the well meaning visitors. He asks the milk to be left saying that he could drink it later.

The mullah then starts the conversation asking why the British had to leave India and what is all the talk about Pakistan and Hindustan. Iqbal is baffled at the naïveté of the villagers who do not know the value of independence. His talk on the topic fails to arouse their interest. They do not have any ill-will towards the British as they have heard stories of English soldiers being nice to their subordinates during the war. Further, of what use can independence be to unlettered rustics? Will they get more land or more bullocks?
Iqbal is startled at this, no doubt. Yet he has to agree with them. He uses the opportunity to sell his brand of ware to these innocent – and ignorant – folk. He decides to make use of the opportunity to enlighten them. “If you want freedom to mean something for you – the peasants and workers – you have to get together and fight. Get the bania Congress government out. Get rid of the princes and the landlords and then freedom will mean for you just what you think it should. More land, more buffaloes, no debts”. (52).

Instead of arousing their interest, this talk makes his listeners suspicious. They are reminded of a comrade who spoke just like that. They are happy when Iqbal assures them that he is not a comrade. For, the comrade did not believe in god and he spoke sacrilegious things and shocked them. According to them, those who have no faith in god are like animals. On the other hand, all the world respects a religious man. Then the talk drifts to Gandhi. The mullah is very much impressed with Gandhi’s prayer meetings, which have won the admiration of people all over the world.

Khushwant Singh points out that the communists, through their irreverent talk drew only flak from the people they were expected to prepare for the revolution. They had no sympathy for a nonbeliever. For them, religion was all important, though they were free from fanaticism. In the few lines on Gandhi spoken by the Muslim cleric, Khushwant Singh reveals, how Gandhi succeeded in penetrating to the remote villages by synthesizing religion with his politics. That is how he succeeded in rousing the illiterate masses of India to rise against oppression.

Iqbal’s repeated assertion on the dishonesty of the whites cuts no ice with them. It only ends up only in antagonizing the lambardar. As far as the Mano Majrans are concerned independence has caused them nothing but misery. Everywhere there is killing and looting. In the British period, there was at least security. All these
statements made by the Sikh lambardar and the Muslim priest are historically authentic. At least that was the condition in the border provinces of the Punjab and Bengal.

The novelist traces the thought process of Iqbal, in the stream of consciousness fashion. It was obvious that time was not yet ripe for proletarian revolution because the proletariat was indifferent to political freedom. Thinking in practicable lines, Iqbal wondered what could he, a single man, do in the plethora of religions, where everyone was involved in the killing. The stage for converting the present bloodshed into a proletarian revolution was not reached yet. The killing instinct could not be directed against the propertied class. He felt quite inadequate in Mano Majra. Further he has not made any sacrifice like going to jail. He must find some way to court imprisonment.

This line of thinking makes one wonder whether Iqbal is serious at all about his mission. He is not a restless revolutionary. Nor is he a strategist. With all his weaknesses, he wants to become a leader by courting imprisonment. Of course, those were the days when leaders were imprisoned, but to think of going to jail just to be counted as a leader seems to be preposterous. It seems Khushwant Singh has purposely included this character to give us a complete picture of the time, which did not lack such self seeking politicians who were mildly fascinated by the leftist ideology.

Ironically, the next morning, Iqbal was arrested by two constables, who came with a readymade, pre-signed warrant, and entered his name in his own presence. ‘It was irregular, of course, but in those strife-torn days, it was the usual practice’. Policemen gave scant respect for rules to be followed and never hesitated to bully the masses.
Almost at the same time, a posse of ten armed constables go to Jugga’s house while he is still asleep and overpower him. His protests that he had nothing to do with the dacoity are of little avail, though the head constable has his own doubts regarding Jugga committing a crime in his own village. When his mother produces the bangles in proof of Jugga’s not being part of the gang, the policeman says that in that case he must be knowing who they were, and they take him with them, after a lot of kicking and beating. Jugga attributes all this to his fate. It has already been written on his forehead.

The magistrate, Hukum Chand, does not like the way Iqbal has been arrested, without even finding out his caste or religion. He is in a rage. The sub-inspector strips Iqbal, and seeing him circumcised, concludes that he is a Muslim and a Leaguer and fills up the records accordingly. A proof of the thoughtlessness of the police of the days.

The police party takes the two prisoners to Chundunnugger prison in a tonga. On the way they talk about the atrocities committed everywhere. There was a truckful of Baluch soldiers who were going from Amritsar to Lahore. On the way they stabbed every Sikh going on the road. When they were nearing the Pakistan border, a stray dog ran across the road and the driver, in his attempt to avoid it, crashed against a tree killing himself and two soldiers. While this incident shows the callousness of the soldiers, in whose estimate Sikh lives were less valuable than that of a stray dog, the party in the tonga attributes it to God’s retribution, which irritates Iqbal and he shows it openly. The tonga driver narrates another incident of four Sikh Sardars shooting at a mile long column of refugees walking towards Pakistan. All this shows that when the question of killing comes, both the sides are equally ruthless.
The treatment Juggut Singh and Iqbal get in the police station is totally different. There are a chair, a table and a charpai in Iqbal’s cell. He is given all the newspapers found in the station. His food is served on a brass plate. On the other hand, there is no furniture in Jugga’s cell. His food is flung at him which he eats out of his hand. Water is poured into his cupped palm. Iqbal is A class, and Jugga C class, just because one looks educated and sophisticated and the other is out and out rustic.

In the course of Iqbal’s thoughts, Khushwant Singh records the evil effects of centuries old caste distinctions.

“Inequality had become an inborn mental concept. If caste was abolished by legislation, it came up in other forms of class distinction. In thoroughly westernized circles like that of the civil servants in the government secretariat in Delhi, places for parking cars were marked according to seniority, and certain entrances to offices were reserved for higher officials. Lavatories were graded according to rank and labelled.” (75).

That is substantially the end of Part I, titled Dacoity, which deals with life as it had always been in Mano Majra, blissfully unaware of the happenings elsewhere. Though the characters and most of the incidents are fictitious, the author succeeds in presenting as much history of the days as possible, including incidents, attitudes and mindset of people, in an extremely interesting manner, in his inimitable style.

‘Kalyug’, according to ancient Indian texts, is the last and the darkest of the four eons, which will be marked by the triumph of evil. All values will be lost and even good people will become bad overnight. Untruth and dishonesty will be rewarded. Very significantly, Khushwant Singh has given this title to the second part
of his narrative, where he presents the darkest days of the subcontinent in modern times.

The section opens with a mild reference to the trains failing to keep to their schedule. People stayed in bed late, waiting for the mail train, which may not appear at all. As goods trains had stopped running, people missed the lullaby to lull them to sleep. Thus, the fixed pattern of Mano Majra went haywire all of a sudden. Then came the soldiers who put up their tents near the station. Armed sentries began to patrol the platform.

Then comes a shocking incident, the arrival of the ghost train, which is described by Khuswant Singh in an extraordinary fashion suited to the occasion. He goes on presenting facts step by step rousing the interest of the reader. It has the appearance of a train in the days of peace, with no one sitting on the roof or between the bogies. Yet it has a ghostly quality. Only the guard gets down and goes to the soldiers along with the station master. Soon Hukum Chand arrives there in his car. Khushwant Singh merely portrays how the scene is observed by a native of the village who has no access to the station.

There is commotion in the village no one being wise to what is happening, yet everyone knowing it in their heart of hearts. All the people, Sikhs as well as Muslims, gathered at the Gurdwara, as they always did on such occasions. The only two people who said anything at all in meetings were Imam Baksh, the mullah and Meet Singh, the Sikh priest. Khushwant Singh uses the occasion to give pen portrait of the two village dignitaries. Imam Baksh was a kindly soul, to whom life has been rather unkind. He was affectionately called ‘uncle’ by everyone in the village. Meet Singh was a peasant without any family to call his own. He was a man of peace, friendly to everyone, Muslim or Sikh. Such are the people who are destined to lead the villagers.
Then how can any village be other than peaceful? There is little talk in the meeting, if one can call it a meeting at all, since things are too ominous to talk about. People do nothing but utter the names of God Almighty, praying for mercy, when a policeman arrives on the scene and asks everyone to load all the firewood and kerosene they are left with, in the two military trucks he has brought.

The villagers stand on their roofs, excitedly waiting for something to happen, forgetting their food, forgetting to feed their children, forgetting to feed and milk their cattle. After sunset, the sky becomes totally dark. Then, in the words of Khushwant Singh, “the northern horizon, which had turned bluish grey, turns orange again. The orange turned into copper and then into a luminous russet. Red tongues of flame leaped into the black sky” (88). If an eerie scene could be described with the beauty of poetry, here it is. He does not mention the word fire. There are red tongues of flame, gigantic because they leap into the sky. These leaping tongues, what do they consume? The answer follows, in the novelist’s own words: “A soft breeze began to blow towards the village. It brought the smell of burning kerosene, then of wood. And then – a faint acrid smell of searing flesh.” (88) That is all he says, but there is no need for crossing the ‘t’ s and dotting the ‘i’s, is there? “They all knew. They had known it all the time. The answer was implicit in the fact that the train had come from Pakistan” (88-89)., Kalyug has started sowing its poisonous seeds in Mano Majra.

What the residents of the village were not able to see has been seen by Hukum Chand, who as required by his office, had to superintend the entire operation. He is totally done up at the end of the day, with physical and mental fatigue. He cannot forget the scene which keeps hounding him. A train load of dead bodies of men, women and children were dragged out as if they were so many pieces of baggage.
After coming to the rest house and lying in bed, he found the scenes of the day coming back to him in panoramic succession, only they were eerie. Through this process of rewinding, Khushwant Singh enables the reader to see the ghostly sights in all their horror. The victims had fear frozen in their eyes, mouths open just as they were shrieking, in various postures, sitting or standing. And the whole train had the nauseating smell of putrefying flesh, faeces and urine. Here is historicity in all its horror presented in a fictionalized manner, with consummate artistry of depicting a chamber of horrors.

This is followed by a brief account of the kind of life Hukum Chand has been leading. It is quite different from the ordinary, but not unusual in India. Death has always had an obsession with him. He has watched his aunt shrieking with terror. In his youth, he has spent many hours at the cremation ground to free himself from the fear of death. He has often watched the ceremonies of cremation. All this filled him with tranquility. He was able to conquer the fear of death, but the idea of ultimate dissolution remained in his mind for ever, making him kind, charitable and tolerant. He stoically bore all the adversities life heaped on him. Though he occasionally joined the merry making groups, he never lost his serenity. Khushwant Singh’s purpose of attributing such a kind of life to Hukum Chand may be to give to the readers, Indian as well as foreign, a glimpse into the Indian mind, how stoicism and fatalism came easily to Indians as a result of their understanding the ultimate reality, with everything in life being evanescent. There were many people of this type in India to be found everywhere till the middle of the twentieth century until the western winds of stark materialism blew everything off.

But even Hukum Chand was shaken to the core by a trainload of dead bodies. No amount of whiskey could drown his horror away. The sub-inspector visits him at
the rest house with the assurance that all the corpses have been burnt to ashes, leaving thousands of skulls. The villagers have been forbidden from going to the spot. From the discussion between the officers that follows, one can fathom the seriousness of the situation that existed all over the frontier during those fateful months. There must have been fifteen hundred people who met death in the single train on that day. “Harey Ram, Harey Ram, Fifteen hundred innocent people! What else is Kalyug?”

exclaims Hukum Chand. Does it not mean that the devil has taken over the responsibility of ruling over the country?

Though refugees in many villages have started moving to refugee camps, Muslims in Mano Majra continue to stay there as usual. The information that forty or fifty refugees have arrived on that day and are made to put up at the Sikh temple alarms Hukum Chand. The orders are that all refugees must be taken to the camps as their presence might induce the people to start retaliating. The sub-inspector assures him that this set of refugees have not suffered much and hence could be harmless. Then they start pondering over the problem of the refugees crossing over the river. Mercifully, the river may start overflowing in monsoon making it impossible for refugees to cross. Hukum Chand orders with finality that the Muslims of the village must be taken out of the area whether they like it or not. The entire conversation goes to show how volatile the situation is. A single spark will do to ignite the whole area.

Grim though it is, the situation is not without its comic interludes as it happened in the case of hijras at Chundunnugger, who refused to move out of the place, though the Sikhs there counted them as Muslims. When there was a childbirth in a Hindu family, these hijras went there unmindful of communal troubles. When the Hindus and the Sikhs wanted to kill them because they were Muslims, they fearlessly started beating their drums and singing, all the while whirling round and round until
their skirts started flying in the air. Then they had the audacity to ask the leaders of the mob. “Now you have seen us, tell us, are we Hindus or Muslims?” making the whole crowd laugh. This scene is an excellent example of how Khushwant Singh could find comedy even amidst ferocity. This incident, while it elicits the smile of the readers, also evokes pity. Unlike the untouchables or the blacks, who are being subjected to harsh treatment, subjugation and exploitation for no fault of theirs other than being born in a certain family, but all the same treated as human beings, albeit as second class citizens, with their own family life, religion, rituals, code of living, entertainments, hermaphrodites are not allowed to lead a natural life in any way because, by birth they are unnatural, since nature has played a cruel joke on them. Their families have disowned them in their adolescence, and they have been taken care of by fellow beings of similar nature. They are not given any occupation to feed themselves.

As a result, they have devised their own way of eking out a living, by converting themselves into comic creatures, with their own way of dancing. They respond to the society in their own way, with their own profanities. They are painfully aware of the indelible coating of obscenity that covers them. The only way they can preserve their mental balance, without being weighed down by the society which refuses to accept them, is by indulging in profanities and laughing at their tormentors. This incident which is a replica of contemporary history, presented by Khushwant Singh with all his humanistic compassion for the oppressed lot, evokes sympathy in the readers, though it is humorous on the surface. It should be remembered, that the lot of these accursed creatures has not changed a whit, except that they are given a new name, a bit tolerant, as the third gender. Their way of life remains almost the
same. It is laudable on the part of the author that he has created an opportunity to insert a paragraph on their condition in those days.

Hukum Chand is very much conscious of his duty as a magistrate. The safety of all the occupants in the area is his responsibility. It is immaterial whether they are Hindus or Sikhs or Muslims. The only way to protect the Muslims of Mano Majra is to get them out of the place, whether they like it or not. It is not going to be that easy given their bond that dates backs to generations and their local patriotism. But it must be accomplished somehow. Once Sikhs and Hindus from Pakistan start entering the place with the stories of woe, it will be too late. Hukum Chand starts talking in riddles, “One should bow before the storm till it passes. See the pampas grass! Its leaves bend before the breeze. The stem stands stiff in its plumed pride. When the storm comes it cracks and its white plume is scattered by the winds like fluffs of thistledown”. After a pause he added “A wise man swims with the current and gets across”. (103).

The statement is made in torrential rains. It looks as though the magistrate is talking about the climate. Far from it, he is talking about the riots going on around them. When the river is running as usual, one can swim in any direction, either with the current or against it. Even then swimming against the current calls for both effort and skill. But it is an altogether different matter when the river is in spates. It would be foolhardy to even make a feeble attempt to swim against the current. That will be suicidal, and wisdom consists in keeping oneself alive and keep the situation under one’s control. What is the use of getting broken, like the stem of the grass and invite disaster? On the other hand, the leaves of the pampas grass protect themselves by bending. Wisdom, under the circumstances, consists in swimming along the current.
As a seasoned officer who has seen many ups and downs in his career as a law enforcement official, Hukum Chand has sensed that the situation is much beyond the control of police officers. A frenzied mob never obeys an order. It has crossed all those stages. When shooting and killing has gone beyond a reasonable limit and people have deliberately taken leave of their senses, any attempt to appeal to their reason will not only be futile but may even prove to be counter-productive. It might end up in increasing their fury.

The deputy commissioner has a daunting task which requires all his ingenuity and professional acumen to tackle. The safety of all the Muslims of Mano Majra is in his hands. That is, to get them out of the place and pack them off to Pakistan, much against their will. First, the fraternal bond that exists between them must be broken. That cannot be done unless they grow suspicious of one other. Therefore, Hukum Chand, with all his experience, worldly knowledge and insight into human psyche, particularly that of criminals, hatches a plan, masterly but sinister.

It is not professionally ethical. It is built on a bunch of canards. Hence, he cannot openly mouth it in the form of an order. Yet he must pass it on to his subordinate and also make him understand its validity. Unprofessional and unethical though it is, it is the only workable plan; and it does work. Hukum Chand braces himself to face his subordinate to pass on his thinking to him without openly spelling it out.

His riddle does not cut much ice with the sub-inspector. He does not understand how the pampas grass is connected with the problem of preventing a riot situation in the village. The magistrate has to be a little more explicit. He refers to Ram Lal’s murder and asks the sub-inspector whether any arrests have been made and is informed that on the basis of information supplied by Jugga, constables have been
sent to arrest Malli’s gang. Further, Jugga had nothing to do with the murder, he is
told, as he was having a session with his sweetheart. Therefore, the sub-inspector asks
whether Jugga and Iqbal can be released.

Hakum Chand pretends to be distracted for a while. Then he asks abruptly
whether Malli’s gang is Sikh or Muslim, as if religion has any relevance to murder.
His subordinate tells him that all of them are Sikhs. The magistrate is still immersed
in his thoughts, and releases them in a sort of soliloquy. How nice it would have been,
he says aloud to himself, if they had been Muslims and the agitator from outside had
been a Leaguer. In that case the Sikhs would have allowed the Muslims to leave the
place. Then he passes on his order to the sub-inspector to release Malli’s gang, the
real murderers, without making any entries in the records and to keep Jugga and Iqbal,
who he knows are innocent, behind bars for some more time.

Hukum Chand is sure that his plan will work. The sub-inspector seems to have
understood it. Being sure of it, the magistrate asks him to inform the commander of
the Muslim refugee camp to come and collect the Muslims of Mano Majra. The
magistrate knows that he has done the correct thing under the circumstances. “The
right and wrong of his instructions did not weigh too heavily on him. He was a
magistrate, not a missionary… There were processes of history to which human
beings contributed willy-nilly. He believed that an individual’s conscious effort
should be directed to immediate ends like saving life when endangered, preserving the
social structure and honoring its conventions”. (105). This is how Hukum Chand
justifies his action. And he seems to be right.

It was fortunate that British India had such officers, who had unswerving
loyalty to the government, dedication to their profession and concern for the people,
which enabled them to follow the spirit of the law rather than its letter when there was
a clash between the two. Probably the training given by the British government, which was rather vigorous, was also responsible for this. This is one of the excellent episodes in the novel where the author has frozen in a portrait the way in which conscientious police officers behaved at that time. He records that Hukum Chand feels elated at these steps, as he has made a minor error, no doubt, but has converted it into a major investment.

The sub-inspector follows the instructions word by word because with his own experience he has understood the motive behind the unethical move. After he reaches the police station, he makes his moves deliberately, slowly and cautiously since he knows that the constables would be puzzled at his moves, as the case is as plain as the palm of one’s hand. The sub-inspector wants Malli and his men released in Mano Majra in full view of the villagers. Then the head constable must put leading questions to them. He must ask them if Sultana’s gang left for Pakistan before or after the dacoity. The sub-inspector ignores the head constable’s assertion that it is long since they left for Pakistan. Then the head constable has to talk to them insinuating that Iqbal is a Muslim Leaguer, though he knows that the truth is to the contrary. The head constable does not make head or tail out of these orders, but agrees to carry them out.

Thus it is that those who committed the crime are released and two innocent persons are retained in the cell. After all it is Kalyug when “fair is foul and foul is fair”. (Shakespeare’s Macbeth). But then, the dictum that motivates the police officers is “All’s Well that Ends Well”.

It is a prudent policy to follow in the circumstances which are beyond the normal control of the police officers. Without such officials, the catastrophe would
have been worse than it actually was. And the author has done well to record this historical fact through the fictitious characters in his novel.

There is a conversation between Iqbal and Jugga who happen to have been locked up in the same cell. Jugga looks at the visitor with awe on account of his education, sophistication and foreign trip, as most of the Indians used to do in those days. He throws a hint to Iqbal on his own love affair and in continuation of his conversation, asks him if he had not slept with many white women. Jugga’s opinion of white women is that they are no less than celestial creatures. Iqbal’s efforts to disillusion him are not very successful.

Khushwant Singh is obsessed with Indian people’s obsession with sex. There are many educated and knowledgeable people in this country and foreign Indologists who feel that Indians, as a race, are obsessed with sex and their mind comes to the subject again and again. In the guise of recording Iqbal’s thoughts, Khushwant Singh goes on:

It came out in their (Indians’) art, literature and religion. One saw it on the hoardings in the cities advertising aphrodisiacs and curatives for ill effects of masturbation. One saw it in the law courts and market places, where hawkers did a thriving trade selling oil made of the skin of sand lizards to put life into tired groins and increase the size of the phallus. . . . One heard about it all the time. No people used incestuous abuse quite as casually as did the Indians. (113).

What is the reason for this obsession? Khushwant has found the reason. It is because an average Indian gets very little opportunity for legitimate sex life. There is little
privacy in their lives. Whatever sex a couple has, is seized in between other chores, when they find a brief interlude of privacy.

Jugga tells him that there is no fun in marriage. In fact in married life there is no time or place for fun. In summer everyone sleeps out in the open and if a couple want to have sex they have to slip away for a short while and complete everything before they are missed by the relations. In winter, men and women sleep separately and the only way is to pretend to answer the call of nature at the same time. What a pity! But that is how sex life has been going on in India for a few centuries.

Yet another thing Indians are obsessed with is knowledge of English. For them, knowledge of the vernacular means nothing. Only an English knowing man is called educated. Iqbal’s argument that there is no need to learn English as the British have left India cuts no ice with Jugga. Iqbal obliges him with teaching how to say ‘good morning’ and ‘good night’. Khushwant exposes the abject slavishness of Indians who admire English language, but do not appreciate the niceties of their own language. Though his purpose is to record the social history of India at the time of partition, he does not confine himself to events connected with partition alone, but has a comprehensive look at all the facets of social life around him, particularly the foibles of fellow Indians. Since he is recording events in the form of fiction he inserts situations here and there for the purpose, that are brief, yet telling. This is the end of the part called Kalyug. Married people do not have married life and people seem to enjoy slavery even after attaining independence.

The third part of the narrative is named after the village. Ironically, the part deals with a total change coming over the village, the village becoming what it has never been. From being a haven of peace, it becomes an abode of suspicion, if not total hatred. People who were hobnobbing with each other as if they belonged to a
single family were divided into two camps which can never be united. And all this change came about through the cunningness of a single man, magistrate Hukum Chand, whose master plan it is. It must be conceded, however, that his intentions were above board. As a law officer, it was his duty to assure the safety of the Muslims. He knew that they cannot stay permanently in Mano Majra, which was after all, camphor amidst the burning fire. Even a puff of wind can set it burning.

Refugees from Pakistan start arriving through various routes. Not all movements could be controlled. Once they come with their tales of woe, and spread themselves in the village, poisonous seeds will be sown in no time. Why, the arrival of the ghost train with thousands of dead bodies has already drawn a pall of uneasy foreboding among the villagers. There is a heavy, ominous silence, palpable, reigning the village and people have started shutting themselves inside their homes. Everyone grows suspicious of the others and seems to feel a need for friends and allies.

The morning after the arrival of the train, they find that everything has been cleared. There is no train, no bogies, no fire and no smoke. Yet, can there be another train carrying corpses? This kind of thinking can poison the entire being of a person, but it cannot be helped in the circumstances. The end of the holocaust seems to be nowhere in sight. It is at this psychological moment when people are in the grip of tormenting fear that the head constable appears with the police party and Malli’s gang of robbers in handcuffs. They are all freed in the presence of the villagers - an unusual step, but it is a part of the unusual plan of the police.

The people know that Jugga and Iqbal, who are retained in prison are innocent. They also know that Malli’s gang committed the crime. Then why are the police releasing all of them, and that too in Mano Majra, instead of their own village?
Then they must all be innocent. Do the police not know their job? The first step of brain washing has proceeded exactly on the lines desired by the police.

The head constable holds a private conversation with the lammadar, who comes to the villagers and asks them if they know anything about Sultana’s gang. The gang has been evacuated to Pakistan as all Muslims of their village have been taken away. The head constable is not finished yet. Was it before or after the murder that they left? Before the puzzled villagers could start thinking, the subject is changed in the meanwhile creating an impression in their minds that it was Sultana’s gang that murdered Ram Lal - a Muslim gang murdered a Hindu – before going to Pakistan. The second step of brain washing successfully completed.

Then comes another question, a leading one regarding a Mussalman babu called Mohammed Iqbal, a member of the Muslim League. Now the police officers know for certain that Iqbal is a Sikh; so all the three pieces of information are their concoction, intended to sow seeds of enmity in the minds of the people. And the police amply succeed in their attempt. Then the villagers are asked if they noticed anything suspicious about him. There has been nothing suspicious about him, the people are sure of it, but when such a question comes from a policeman, they are not sure. One cannot be sure of educated people, is their reaction.

Meet Singh, the one person who has moved closely with Iqbal by making him stay in the gurdwara is ignored, and the next question is put to the villagers, as to whether the man came to the village before the dacoity or after. Now, Iqbal came to Mano Majra along with the policemen and all of them including the magistrate and the sub-inspector know it. Yet, why such misleading questions? First, they have made the villagers believe that Iqbal is a Muslim and now it is made up that he could have committed the murder. The third step in the brainwashing has been effectively carried
out. The villagers have been led into believing that Ram Lal was murdered by Muslims and the Sikh gang had nothing to do with it. How diabolical! Hukum Chand has successfully accomplished the purpose he had in mind. “The head constable’s visit had divided Mano Majra into two halves as neatly as a knife cuts through a pat of butter” (127) says Khushwant Singh in a telling manner. It is seldom that so few words are used to convey effectively so much of truth. The simile of butter knife is excellent. The operation, though it produced a deadly result, has been carried out with utmost smoothness.

The police with their posture of authority and tactics of presenting facts, half truths and concocted facts can create any opinion among the public. And they seldom hesitate before using such techniques, to direct any case in the direction they want. They have been doing it in the British period and they continued to do so even in free India. The tactics are followed till date. The same tactics are followed by national bodies of intelligence to set countries against each other by creating opinions they want among the public.

As a result of the brainwashing undergone by them, the Mano Majrans, both Muslims and Sikhs start wondering whether the rumors of deadly attacks on their co-religionists by the others could not be true. There were rumors of Sikhs committing atrocities on Muslims in Patiala, Ambala and Kapurtala. There were rumors of modesty of women being ravaged. Many women were said to have killed themselves rather than lose their modesty. Copies of the Quran were said to have been torn up. All of a sudden every Sikh became a bad character out to molest the Muslims.

It was the same case with the Sikhs. All of a sudden, they were reminded of the last guru’s warning that Muslims had no loyalties. They also remembered Indian history lessons which said that sons killed fathers and brothers had blinded brothers;
also three Sikh gurus had been killed and infant children of one of them were butchered. Thousands have been slain for refusing to accept Islam. Muslims never respected women. Many women had killed themselves to protect their modesty, from the hands of Muslims. Many women had been raped. How can they forget one trainload of corpses, massacred by Muslims, and they cremated them. Ram Lal’s murder and the presence of a suspicious character, an educated babu also disturbed them. All these things made them furious.

A group of Sikhs gather in lambardar’s house and start talking. They think that Iqbal is a spy sent by Muslims whom they had been looking upon as their own brothers and sisters. Repeated assertions by Meet Singh fail to cut any ice with them. The youngsters are angry with the Muslims who have betrayed them. Meet Singh’s statement that the Muslims of Mano Majra have not done any harm to them is not refuted, but it is not sufficient to assuage them.

However, their village loyalty comes to the fore and everyone is firm that they will not permit any harm to be done to their villagers by any outsider. They are too naïve to be aware of the fact that they are contradicting themselves. All the same, they cannot turn away the refugees who seek their hospitality. Yet, no one in the gathering is prepared to throw the Muslims out.

This scene where a number of Sikhs, young and old, speak out their minds, brings out the fact that partition has created more problems than it has solved. Partition is purely the making of the politicians and the commonfolk have had nothing to do with it. They do not even know what it is all about. All that they know is that killing and raping have been going on indiscriminately. Throughout the novel, we see only refugees running away. There is no mention of any one moving from India to Pakistan willingly in the hope of getting a better deal. Even the refugees are not
allowed to run away in peace. They are mercilessly butchered by frenzied mobs. Even trained soldiers, who are expected to behave better, are not free from this madness. Young men are easily moved by what is done to others. Violence spreads like wild fire without permitting anyone to think for himself.

In this gathering, there are many who have worked themselves up to wreck vengence for what has been done to their follow Sikhs, but all of them feel helpless when they think of village loyalty. When it is impossible to ask the Muslims to leave the place in view of their own safety, how can they think of hurting them? None of them has asked for a separate land for themselves, nor has any of them thought of the Muslims in any way alien to them. All this is recorded by Khushwant Singh to show that partition is an accident that has happened without the knowledge or consent of the people concerned. It must have been the same on the other side also. Muslims across the border must have felt the same way about the Sikhs and Hindus who have been living with them.

This is followed by one of the most poignant scenes ever penned in any literature. While they are discussing the next step to be taken and are too confused to arrive at any conclusions, there arrives mullah Imam Baksh, putting a straightforward question as to their decision about the Muslims. A young man assures him, addressing him as ‘Uncle’, that as long as they were there, nobody will dare to touch the Muslims. Many others voice their assent. Significantly, there is not a single word of dissent.

The words Imam Baksh speaks are significant: “What have we to do with Pakistan? We were born here. So were our ancestors. We have lived amongst you as brothers”. (133). This is exactly how the common Muslim folk in the border area felt. They cannot feel any other way since they are rooted to the soil. If they were
uprooted, they would wither away. Going to Pakistan for them is like to an entirely alien country. It can be noticed that in all the villages, Muslims are evacuated and packed off to Pakistan much against their will. This is not what they bargained for. The author is able to bring out their helplessness in an excellent manner. Instead of prosperity, partition has brought them only misery.

Starting with the lambardar, many in the gathering assure the mullah that they will die first before allowing the Muslims to be touched. There is a lot of crying in between. After a while, the lambardar tries to be realistic. He understands that there is nothing that they can do if surrounded by mobs. Many in the gathering agree with him. Finally, the lambardar says in a heavy voice that he would advise the Muslims to go to the refugee camp for a few days and return after the trouble is over. Their properties will be looked after by the Sikhs. Even then, if they decided to stay on, the Sikhs would defend them with their lives. Imam Baksh understands that there is no choice. He agrees to go. This is followed by embraces, sobbing and crying. This emotionally changed scene is an indication of the communal amity that existed even in the worst of days.

Imam Baksh tells his daughter Nooran to get ready to move to Pakistan. She protests childishly that this is their village and nobody can throw them out. She then goes straight to Jugga's house and meets his mother, who is angry with the girl. She accuses her of turning her son into a rogue and sending him to jail. The girl tells her that she would not leave the place since Jugga has promised to marry her. When the old woman adamantly refuses, the girl confesses to her that she is carrying Jugga's child, and if the people in Pakistan know about it, they might kill the child. The mother, naturally, explains to her that it is impossible for her to keep her amidst all the turmoil. She promises her that Jugga will get her as soon as he is out. This scene tells
the readers how cruel the partition had been. It was a purely political decision without taking into consideration the human, sociological and psychological problems.

The next morning witnesses another drama when the Muslims are taken to the camps. The scene is comical as well as pathetic. The Muslims want to take as much of their belongings including buffaloes and bullock carts. The Pakistani officer tells them to carry a bag or two and leave everything behind. The lambardar gets one more shock that the Muslims are going to be sent to Pakistan. In that case who will keep their property? It is a sin to touch other people’s property. The Sikh officer in-charge solves the problem by appointing Malli and his gang custodians of the property and they gleefully start taking everything away.

Mano Majra is a totally transformed place, with half of its people forced to leave against their will and those who remain left with a feeling of forlornness. It will be long before they get used to the situation. Those who go away too will take a long time to forget Mano Majra where they have spent generations and their emotional bond to the place. They might take equally long time to get adjusted to the country, which, according to its architects, would be their Mecca.

The way in which this scene and the preceding one are presented effectively convey to the readers that partition has been a folly. It has created enmity where it did not exist and hostility where it was not called for. It is forceful indictment. Through episodes that are fictional, but are copies of history presented in a moving manner, in felicitous but powerful English, the author has been able to convey his message effectively.

The fourth and concluding part of the novel is titled Karma and it is significant. The Sanskrit word ‘karma’ has got so much of content in it that it is
difficult to explain it in a few words. Karma is a concept that is deep-seated in the Indian psyche. All the native religions of India subscribe to the Karma theory. Karma literally means ‘a deed’. Any deed produces some action or reaction. But the boundary of a deed does not end there. Every deed produces a reaction either in the person concerned or in the surroundings. In that way it affects one or a number of people. It may either be beneficial to the others, an individual, a group or the society at large, or it may be harmful. The theory of karma as expounded by the Indians holds that the reaction caused by karma leaves its stamp in the cosmos. It is as if the good or the bad caused by the individual to the others is recorded in a huge ledger. If it is a good deed, it is recorded in the ‘good’ or the ‘virtue’ column, and if it is a bad deed, causing some kind of harm to an individual or group, it is recorded in the ‘bad’ or the ‘vice’ column.

The ‘virtue’ and the ‘vice’ thus recorded get accumulated, and this forms the ‘karma’ of the person which visits on him either in the same life or in any one of the future births. Karma works inexorably, there is no way of escaping from it. The good deed results in a person enjoying happiness in some form or another; the evil deeds cause him some kind of suffering.

The Indian mind, conditioned for generations, believes that everything that happens to the individual in the course of his life is a result of his karma. If he gets good food, gets a lucrative job, gets good parents, a good wife or good children it is because he has been good to other creatures in his previous life or lives. If he suffers out of poverty, gets wicked children, gets married to a shrew, loses money or meets with violent death, it is attributed to the wicked deeds he has committed in one or more of his previous births.
When something good happens in a person’s life he believes it is all because he has accumulated ‘virtues’ in the previous births. On the other hand, when a person undergoes some suffering or other however tough or unbearable it might be, he blames himself saying that it is all because of what he has done in his previous birth. Though it makes the person belittle himself, it also acts as a cushion which makes his misery bearable.

The concluding part of the novel presents the nemesis of what has been going on in the previous few decades. There is so much of death, destruction and barbarism making the earth worse than an inferno, all owing to the deadly poison that has been injected into the body politic.

The theory of karma however, is not confined to the fourth part of the novel. It runs throughout the story, underlining it at every stage. The narrative opens with a reference to the summer of 1947 which is very much unlike the other Indian summers. While the summer was drier and dustier, monsoon took its own time to arrive. “People began to say that God was punishing them for their sins”. (1) The author then goes on to give the eerie catalogue of all the wicked deeds of the previous months.

Iqbal and Juggut Singh get arrested for Ram Lal’s murder which neither of them has committed. Iqbal tries to rouse Jugga’s anger against the government by insinuating that it is the government that makes him a villain. Jugga’s reaction to this remark is typical of an Indian who traces everything back to his fate. He says, “No, Babu Sahib, it is our fate. It is written on our foreheads and on the lines of our hands”. (65)

The entire nature of happenings is changed since human nature takes a macabre turn in the days that immediately follow partition. The arrival of the ghost
train in Mano Majra, though not entirely unexpected, draws a pall of gloom over the entire village. That is followed by the trick of Hukum Chand which cuts the village into two halves. That night, the puzzled villagers meet in the lambardar’s house and start with blaming their fate. God is punishing them for their sins, they say repeatedly.

The part ‘Karma’ starts with the happenings after the Muslims of Mano Majra are forcibly taken out of their homes to the refugee camp. Even then the Sikhs of Mano Majra are naïve enough to think that they might be kept in the refugee camps for a few days and returned later. The fact that they are being taken to Pakistan shocks them further. Their shock and grief are further accentuated by the heartless acts of Malli and his gang who take to the job of ransacking the Muslim houses with a vengeance. They beat and drag away the cattle while they are piteously bellowing and slash off the fowl.

During all this, the river Sutlej keeps rising menacingly, frightening colonies of birds and submerging grass and trees. Naturally the attention of the Mano Majrans, those who continue to stay there is drawn to the river which looks as if it might overflow at any time. The situation calls for a constant watch by sentries. Those who are keeping the watch witness sights that are beyond human comprehension. Soon the rising waters start carrying carcasses of cows, bulls, horses, men, women and children. Mano Majrans are so innocent and so humane that they initially think that they have all been carried away by the floods. A close scrutiny, however, reveals that they have all been butchered and mutilated. A merciless massacre has been going on, on the other side of the border. A fact that these gentle folk find hard to stomach, but stomach it they must, what else was there for them to do?
History tells us that such massacres were every day happening in those days. The novelist had been a witness to all these happenings. The shock that he carried with him is given vent to in this novel, published less than a decade after the happenings. And he presents them as a novelist, in as much an artistic manner as possible. No one would believe that such inhuman incidents could be presented artistically, but Khushwant Singh amply succeeds in doing the impossible. He presents a picture of what was happening before the eyes of the villagers. This is a part of what they saw:

An old peasant with a grey beard lay flat on the water. His arms were stretched out as if he had been crucified. His mouth was wide open and showed his toothless gums, his eyes were covered with film, his hair floated about his head like a halo. He had a deep wound on his neck which slanted down from the side to the chest. A child’s head butted into the old man’s armpit. There was a hole in its back. There were many others coming down the river like logs hewn on the mountains and cast into streams to be carried down the plains. A few passed through the middle of the arches and sped onward faster. Others bumped into the piers and turned over to show their wounds till the currents turned them over again. Some were without limbs, some had their bellies torn open, many women’s breasts were slashed. They floated down the sunlit river, bobbing up and down. Overhead hung the kites and vultures. (151).

The account is fictitious, but woven out of a number of real incidents of barbarism perpetrated on unsuspecting innocent masses. The passage presents to us the horror in all its nakedness, more pungently than presenting the acts itself. It is an
excellent example of a judicious mixture of horror and pathos presented in an artistic language by a master artist who speaks from his heart of hearts.

People who watched it were at a loss as to what reply they should give to inquisitive enquirers waiting in their homes. They do not have the courage to narrate what they have seen. But there is no one inquisitive enough to put any questions to them because the villagers have their own share of spectacles. Even earlier, when the sentries were approaching the river, they heard the sound of a train. It took some time for them to conclude that it was indeed a train because it came ominously, without any lights. As usual, the lambardar, being an innocent Mano Majran, refuses to think of the worst. Can it not be a goods train? Can it not be drawn by an American engine, which often wails instead of whistling?

This train has attracted the villagers who remained at home, and they keep watching it, trying to figure out the meaning of the mysterious looking train. There was no need however, for using their imagination having already seen one such train. There is no need for any prompting now. The author puts all their thoughts succinctly in a single sentence. “They were sure that the soldiers would come for oil and wood” (152). Having once experienced it, they are sure this is what is going to happen. Only, they do not have sufficient oil and firewood now. The authorities seem to be aware of the predicament of the villagers. They do not bother them with demand for firewood and kerosene. Instead, they seek the help of a bulldozer.

The author gives an elaborate account of the bulldozer digging a fifty meter long trench and the bodies being brought in stretchers and thrown into the pit. The work goes on from early morning to sunset after which the trench is closed. The author remembers to mention that two soldiers were left near the closed trench to
guard the grave from the depredation of jackals and badgers; this is meant to increase
the horror of the scene.

Anyone can easily imagine the mental state of the villagers who have seen so
much horror in a single day. They walk through the street, past the houses left empty
by their Muslim brethren, towards the gurdwara. Here they try to get some sleep,
however fitful it might be.

Even this fitful sleep is disturbed by unexpected unwanted visitors brought in
a jeep. It contains Sikhs clad in Khaki talking with insolence. The one who looks like
the leader, talks in the most indecent manner possible and purposely so. His purpose
is to hurt the villagers whom he regards as less than worms. “Well, if the village is not
dead, than it should be. It should be drowned in a palmful of water. It consists of
eunuchs” (155)

This is how the visitors regard the Sikhs of Mano Majra. The leader of the
group is a mere boy, who looks clownish in his pseudo military attire. His appearance
is ludicrous enough to warrant an elaborate pen portrait by the novelist.

The leader had an aggressive bossy manner. He was a boy in his teens
with a little beard which was glued to his chin with brilliantine. He was
small in size, slight of build and altogether effeminate; a glossy red
ribbon showed under the acute angle of his bright blue turban. His
khaki army shirt hung loosely from his round drooping shoulders. He
wore a black leather Sam Browne: the strap across his narrow chest
charged with bullets and the broad belt clamped about his still
narrower waist. On one side it had a holster with the butt of a revolver
protruding; on the other side there was a dagger. He looked as if his mother had dressed him up as an American cowboy. (155)

This boy with the comical figure probably found an opportunity to show himself off as a hero in the peculiar circumstances prevailing at that time. When else can he find an opportunity to conduct himself in a most disgraceful manner, spitting venom on his elders and get away with all that? And he takes advantage of the villagers’ suspicion of the city dwellers. He starts with questioning the potency of the men folk. He knows it will touch them to the quick. And so it does.

He ridicules every one of them for calling himself a Sikh. He questions if they are in anyway worthy of the race. After having successfully cowed down all the menfolk, he opens up his theory. For each misdeed done to the Hindus or Sikhs they must respond with two misdeeds, he says. Meet Singh’s hesitant question as to why they should be cruel to the Muslims of Mano Majra who have not done anything wrong, is silenced by the boy leader’s question as to what the Sikhs in Pakistan have done to get killed. All the objections raised by the priest is countered by the leader in a clever manner, until all the people gathered there prepare themselves to listen to him, albeit with considerable reluctance. Though still a boy, he knows that a reference to potency will rouse any male member. And he succeeds in that.

When he asks for volunteers to carry out his horrendous mission, it is Malli who comes forward immediately. And Malli is an outsider as far as Mano Majra is concerned. Malli is followed by his companions. All of them are boisterously admired by the young leader. Then come the refugees from Pakistan. Of course, there are a few villagers also, in spite of their having wept profusely at the departure of their Muslim friends. Khushwant Singh insists that Mano Majra remains unpolluted by bigotry till the last moment, which is a tribute to the tolerance of the Indians. That
partition happened in spite of all such tolerance is a grotesque fact in the history of western India.

Even before independence, there were organizations, Hindu as well as Muslim, which propagated fascism. Hindu organizations dubbed Muslims as foreigners, ready to sabotage the country. People were told that Muslims could never be friendly with the Hindus. Similarly, Muslim organizations systematically taught the gospel of hatred. Muslims were told never to trust the Hindus. These organizations caught hold of youngsters and subjected them to systematic indoctrination. Those who spoke in these camps were veterans who had done their homework thoroughly and came with their own distorted versions of religious philosophy, history, and sociology. The volunteers who attended such camps were easily brainwashed, since they were told what they were taught was authentic stuff. Violence was preached as the right means. The heroes of the past were cited as examples. The youngsters were told to emulate them. Gandhism was belittled.

This boy leader is an excellent example of what such indoctrination do to impressionable youngsters. Imbibed with what was doled out to him as patriotism, he is out to prove his loyalty to his nation. He wants to prove that he is another Sivaji, another Gobind Singh and what not. As a result, there were in the composite India, a good number of armed youngsters who were thirsting for blood and thirsting for glory. In their mental state of frayed nerves, sacrificing life was an easy task for them.

The leader outlines his devilish plan to the newly recruited volunteers. They are planning to attack the train that will take the Muslims from the Chundunnugger camp to the safety of Pakistan. The leader chalks out in detail his plan to kill almost all the people travelling in the train. The volunteers were impressed with the plan which looked foolproof to them. Their admiration for the leader grew.
When news regarding this plot reaches the magistrate, he feels totally helpless. He knows very well that things have gone out of his hand; the rioters have lost all respect for the police. He says in despair that it would matter the least if another thousand get killed out of the total population of four hundred million. Their job of burial also will become easy, the river being in spates. The sub-inspector assures him that by sheer ingenuity he was able to get all the Muslims of Chundunnugger safely transported to the refugee camp, without a single one of them getting killed. Even Hukum Chand seems to think that the crisis might soon blow over and normalcy might return. It is because his brain has been blunted on account of all the mindless rioting going on all around. He becomes his old self once again, only when he hears of the train carrying refugees leaving Mano Majra station that night and the miscreants waiting to ambush it.

Hukum Chand takes a few minutes to think; he mulls the matter over and is at his diplomatic best. He wants Jugga and Iqbal released at once and taken to Mano Majra without wasting a minute. The sub-inspector follows the order to the letter. Juggut Singh is full of wrath, turned against Malli. The sub-inspector fuels it by informing him that all the Muslims have left Mano Majra and Malli and his gang are looting their property. But, when Jugga gets down from the tonga, he forgets all about Malli and starts thinking of Nooran. Even if everybody has left the village, he feels that Nooran will be there somewhere, hiding herself. Perhaps his mother would have given her asylum.

After finding all the Muslims evacuated, Jugga’s mind is made up. He goes to the gurdwara with a determination. It is late at night and everyone has gone to sleep. Hearing the loud banging at the door, Bhai Meet Singh opens it, to find Jugga entering. “In the dark he looked larger than ever. His figure filled the door way”
Certainly, Jugga has grown larger than ever. He wants the Guru’s word, the Guru’s blessing for the noble act he has decided to perform. Meet Singh, naturally considers it nuisance, and tries to put him off. Finding Jugga insistent, the priest reads a random passage from the morning prayer and follows it up with a word of explanation. If he, Jugga, is going to do something good, the Guru will help him. If he does something bad, the Guru will stand in his way. Satisfied with it, Jugga goes out. He goes to the railway track where the saboteurs have tied a tight rope horizontally above the railway track so that all roof travellers will be sliced off. The train carrying the Muslim refugees to Pakistan has left the station and is moving towards the bridge. Just then, unnoticed by anyone, Jugga starts climbing the steel span. He stretches on the rope and tries to catch hold of the knot.

It is only then that the leader of the saboteurs notices him and commands him to come off lest he should be killed. Obviously he is unaware of the intent of the big man on the rope, who whips out a kirpan from his waist and begins slashing at the rope. Only then do the waiting volunteers find out that he is trying to undo whatever they are at. Just as he is vigorously hacking the rope, the leader raises his rifle and fires a shot at him, which cuts off one of Jugga’s legs. This does not deter him in the least as he continues cutting the rope in frantic haste. Even when he is shot at again and his body slides off the rope, he persists in his task, even using his teeth, until the rope has been cut into shreds. He is being mercilessly shot at by the puzzled volunteers.

“The man shivered and collapsed. The rope snapped in the centre as he fell. The train went over him, and went on to Pakistan” (190). These are the concluding lines of the novel, celebrating the sacrifice of one unruly Sikh peasant who had earned
nothing but notoriety in his life. But in his death, which is his own choice, he saves thousands of innocent lives from the hands of a devilish mob.

Three characters of the novel stand out, though there is no hero or villain. Khushwant Singh’s characters are not black or white, and defy classification as good or bad. Through Hukum Chand, the author portrays the traits and conduct of the civil servants in British India. It is a realistic portrayal, depicting his loyalty to the government, sense of responsibility, determination to achieve his ends and ingenuity with which he achieves them. Through this character, Khushwant Singh achieves more than that. Hukum Chand has had a unique young age, with occult practices, which made him realize the evanescence of human life and enabled him to conquer the fear of death. But, with all that, he was not prepared for the sight of the array of dead bodies in what the author calls ‘the ghost train’.

Now, past middle age, having lost his wife and daughter, Hukum Chand looks rather forlorn, sustained only by his devotion to duty. All this is in keeping with Khushwant Singh’s objective of being a historical novelist. Hukum Chand’s youth, though out of the ordinary, is not altogether unknown in India. In every village there would have been a handful of people attracted by mysticism and indulging in practicing them. Some do acquire a bit of spiritual elevation as Hukum Chand.

Now, on the verge of attaining old age, he seeks consolation in whiskey and women. When a courtesan is brought to him, carefully selected by his subordinate officer, he makes a few clumsy attempts at love making. When he meets her a second time, he is carried away by a feeling of paternal love for the pathetic creature and is happy to be made fun of by the young girl. The feudal practice of men of the upper strata seeking the company of courtesans just for the heck of it, continued till the first few decades of the twentieth century. The practice was adopted by the civil service
officers who enjoyed lording over the commoners. This practice finds its echo in Hukum Chand’s sexual escapades.

His gamble to divide the village by planting right suspicions at the right time pays off. He succeeds in dividing Muslims and taking them away to refugee camp. That is the only way their safety could be achieved. But, once he learns of the plot to kill the refugees in the train, he is again worried. His worry is accentuated by the fact that Haseena, for whom he had developed a paternal affection in the course of his two casual meetings with her, will also be travelling in the train. She must be protected through some means. It is then he thinks of releasing Jugga, inform him of his sweet heart being in the train, and expect him to take some step or the other to save her. Hukum Chand counts on the audacity and impulsiveness of Jugga to do something. Hukum Chand behaves like any middle-aged man in a predicament.

Another character who attracts our attention is Iqbal, with a name that lends itself to different interpretations. He is a clean shaven Sikh, hence a heretic, yet held in awe in Mano Majra since he is an educated man from the city. He feels as a fish out of water in the village, having been sent there by his leaders, whoever they might be. Though he uses communist jargon to impress people, he lacks conviction and courage. Though he tells Meet Singh that he has come there to stop the killings, he is rattled by the mere news of murder having taken place. He is purposely implicated in the murder of Ram Lal and jailed along with another suspect, Juggut Singh. He wonders whether this could be counted as sacrifice and help him climb the ladder of leadership. He imagines that “the party paper would front page the news with his photograph: ANGLO – AMERICAN CAPITALIST CONSPIRACY TO CREATE CHAOS (lovely alliteration) COMRADE IQBAL IMPRISONED ON BORDER. It would all go to make him a hero” (173). When he comes out of prison he finds that
everything has changed upside down. Things have gone beyond control. There is no way bloodshed can be stopped. He drowns himself in whiskey, imagining that it might clear his thinking.

On the face of it, Iqbal looks like an irrelevant character. The only purpose of the author in portraying this so called communist is to give the readers a complete picture of the day. Talks on nationalism, terrorism and communism were common on the day and impressionable young men and even women were attracted by this slogan mongering. Even weak willed among them uttered words like revolution and social change without being prepared for undergoing the ordeal implied by a revolution. Iqbal is obviously too easy going a person to be a revolutionary. All that he can do is talk and when it comes to action he develops cold feet. And he drinks to forget his worries, a habit no revolutionary can afford to develop. All this goes to show that Iqbal is one of the young men of those days who were somewhat attracted by the revolutionary jargon but did not develop the conviction or courage needed for it.

It would be interesting to contrast him with the young Sikh leader who uses vituperative language and rouses fifty people to action. At the most he would have undergone a few days of brain washing. Yet he browbeats so many people into compliance. Without such heroes who imagine themselves to be patriots, the communal rioting could not have been as widespread and as brutal as it was.

The most important of all characters in the novel is Juggut Singh, the tall Sikh youth with a criminal record. He has committed robberies and murders, and yet there is something people like about him. When people call him ‘badmash’, it seems more a term of affection than derision. While in jail, he tells Iqbal that whenever agricultural work is available, he is busy with the job. But it is not available round the year. When there is no work, it is impossible for him to be idle. Hence he indulges in wrong
deeds. Though he blames it all on his fate, Iqbal is right when he accuses the government and the society of having made him a criminal. It is true that Juggut’s father and grandfather were criminals and murderers, but all of them were products of the times which did not provide them with employment. The government which pounced on them every now and then did little to reform them. As a result, dacoity often leading to murder, was common in those days. Through the single act of dacoity in the opening chapter of the novel, and through the characters of Juggut Singh and Malli, Khushwant Singh gives us a picture of a cross section of rural society as it existed in those days.

Juggut Singh, who is always spitting venom on individuals, government and the society, has a soft side also. He is passionately in love with the weaver’s daughter, and has enthralled her so much through his behavior that she willingly gives herself away to him. It is because Hukum Chand, the magistrate, is convinced of his sincerity in love and a bit of selflessness lurking in him that he releases him, counting upon him to do something to protect the refugees.

The height to which Juggut Singh, the tall badmash, rises at the end is not incredible as he is already taller than the rest of his peers, in stature and spirit also. That he loses his own life in saving the lives of all the refugees in the train may be unusual, but not totally incredible. Here comes into play the author’s ability to make his fiction credible. The denouement of the story is a fusion of realism and idealism, history and fiction.

Khushwant Singh is an excellent observer of nature. He is alive to every movement of the flora and fauna around him, and the sky and the clouds. He makes excellent use of nature, making it part of his narration. His artistry is revealed in making nature reflect the moods of men. The novel opens with a reference to a hotter
than usual summer reflecting the fury and hatred exhibited by men. There is a thunderstorm late in the night on the day the first ghost train arrives. Though Hukum Chand’s initial reaction is to welcome the showers which come late in September, he starts shivering when he thinks of the corpses. He is worried whether the rain has put out the funeral fire of the dead bodies. But the sub-inspector assures him that they were all burnt to ashes before the rains started. Again in the night when the police head constable leaves after planting suspicion and hatred in the minds of the villagers, it starts raining, reflecting the confusion of people.

It was a gloomy night. The breeze that had swept away the clouds blew them back again. At first they came in fleecy strands of white. The moon wiped them off its face. Then they came in large billows, blotted out the moonlight and turned the sky a dull grey. The moon fought its way through, and occasionally patches of the plain sparkled like silver. Later, clouds came in monstrous black formation and spread across the sky. Then without any lightening or thunder, it began to rain. (129)

And there is a lot of activity going on in the village that has lost its peace and innocence once for all. Towards end of the story, river Sutlej starts rising, threatening to engulf the village, which is already engulfed in gloom of its own. Then they see corpses coming in water.

On the whole, Khushwant Singh has successfully blended history and fiction in the narrative and presents them in the manner of a consummate artist. When he presents history, it is not like dry classroom lesson but in a gripping manner without sacrificing the niceties of fiction, through dialogues or thought processes of the characters.
It will be very appropriate to begin the discussion on the narrative techniques in *Train to Pakistan* with a perceptive comment by William Walsh: “It is a tense, economical novel, thoroughly true to the events and the people. It goes forward in a trim, athletic way and its un-emphatic voice makes it a genuinely human document.” (18). The novel is, indeed, a piece of continuous narrative. “The ceaseless flow of action … and the accelerating tempo leads onto an incisive climax with an amazing sweep.” (“A Myth Demolished”, Surabhi Banerjee 135, *A Man Called Khushwant Singh*)

Khushwant Singh is widely acclaimed as a master story-teller. His short stories and novels have mesmerised a number of readers of two or three generations, all of whom testify to the freshness of Khushwant Singh’s oeuvres. His remarkable skill in construction is evident in the fast pace in which a series of dramatic incidents happen. Events in this novel move fast as if in an action film, and the narration makes the readers visualise the happenings. At the outset, the peaceful atmosphere of Mano Majra where the villagers are leading an uneventful existence is depicted rapidly. Then a series of events --- the love affair between Jugga and Nooran, the murder of the village money lender by a gang of dacoits, the Government official Hukum Chand’s manipulation of the situation as per his wishes, the arrival of a train from Pakistan with thousands of corpses, the dead bodies floating in the river, the evacuation of local Muslims to a nearby camp, the plan to attack the train which is scheduled to carry the Muslims to Pakistan and Jugga’s sacrifice to save his beloved Nooran--- are described in rapid succession without even a slight of slackening of pace.

Marion Crawford once described the novel a “pocket theatre” because a novel within itself contains not only a plot and characters but also a setting and action. The
element of action of fictitious people in *Train to Pakistan* endows it with the quality of a powerful drama. It can even be called a dramatic novel. Many incidents happen in this novel but they are fused together as integral parts of a pattern. The gripping narration of happenings sustains the reader’s curiosity and interest from the start to the finish. The readers never for a moment lay the book down till they complete the reading. Khushwant Singh has selected a tense moment in Indian history. And that moment is blended with the placing of situations one after the other which happen as corollaries. The reader’s expectation as to what would befall Nooran is kept in suspense till the climax. Right from the becoming till the end the readers are on toes because of the gripping narrative characterised by tense moments and movements.

To Clara Reeve, the novel is basically a picture of real life and manners and of times in which it is written. The story of this novel happens during the period of the Partition of the sub-continent into two countries and the characters are true-to-life. The locale Mano Majra is a typical hamlet situated on Indo-Pakistan border. It is here the entire action takes places and hence prime importance is given by the novelist to the setting. The locale almost becomes a living character or one of the dramatis personae in the novel. Mano Majra, indeed, represents “many such frontier villages atrociously destroyed under the gruesome impact of Partition” (“A Myth Demolished,” Surabhi Banerjee, 135 - *A Man Called Khushwant Singh*). The descriptions of the setting add to the powerful realism of the novel.

The novel *Train to Pakistan* abounds in images. An image is a verbal picture—a picture made of words and it makes the expression concise, compact and condensed. The oft-repeated use of an image turns into a symbol which yields suggestive or symbolic or implied meaning. Symbols are not only decorative but also illustrative. The symbols in *Train to Pakistan* cease to be decorative pieces. They
work at functional level carrying several shades of meaning illustrating the ideas behind them. A number of critics have written elaborately on symbolism in this novel and their views have been summed up in the following paragraphs. Even the chapter headings are symbolic. ‘Kalyug’ stands for the upward swing of evil and ‘Karma’ shows nemesis.

As a narrator, Khushwant Singh frequently uses symbolism. It is there in the title of the first two works. The train in *A Train to Pakistan* is a symbol of dynamism and movement. There is movement all around, some in the right direction and some in the wrong direction. To begin with, the life at Mano Majra moves in accordance with the movement of train. Even express trains that do not stop there have their own function of marking time. Finally, when the movement of the train goes away, Mano Majra loses its uniqueness and becomes different. The arrival of the ghost train shocks the villagers. The last train, which forms the title of the novel, goes into Pakistan proclaiming the triumph of humanism.

The ‘train’, a major and highly effective image becomes a multi-levelled symbol on account of its recurrence in the novel *Train to Pakistan*; it has a sinister role. The first edition of the novel was originally titled Mano Majra. Mano Majra owes its name to a place, which is the centre of action in the sequence of events resulting in catastrophic consequences. The change in the title seems almost an outcome of deep thought, not a matter of mere chance or conjecture. Shahane aptly remarks:

The change is from the static to the dynamic: Mano Majra is a fixed point in space, whereas the train is a symbol of motion. The use of the word ‘train’ is significant in other ways too. The train signifies groups or multitudes of people who are on the move. On the eve of the
partition of the Indian sub-continent, millions of the people from either side of the dividing boundary were on the way to seeking refuge and security. Millions of Non-Muslims from Pakistan were seeking a passage to India, a land of hope and peace. Millions of Muslims from India sought the road to Pakistan, the land of Islamic faith and promise. Thus, the train implies the movement of vast communities, torn from their links of nativity, from their place of birth and upbringing and areas of traditional growth in search of a new “Jerusalem”.


It denotes the terrible process of this change. The ‘train’ symbol is also suggestive of the fate of individuals, the destinies of two newly-formed nations, consequent upon a political decision rather a historical blunder and the miseries, sufferings and privations which issue from it.

The train also serves as a symbol pointing out the domination of Machines in the era of Science and Technology. The paramount importance given to Machines in the modern materialistic age has caused colossal destruction of humanistic values. Man feels rootless and alienated. The novel centres almost around existentialism. This rootlessness of man – his severance from the bonds of the earth, which reared him – is well brought out by the train symbol. The association of Mano Majra with the train could be viewed as a confrontation between the innocent and ignorant farmer and the impersonal and indifferent Machines.

More importantly, the train is emblematic of the recurrent rhythmic pattern in the novel. E.K.Brown, a discerning critic, in his analysis of the idea of rhythm in
fiction has commented on the significance of recurrent patterns and cited several examples particularly, from the novels of E.M.Forster. In a similar context, the train in Khushwant Singh’s novel is at the heart of the sequences and processes of motivation. “Mano Majra has always been known for its railway station” (TTP 3). While express trains do not stop at Mano Majra, two passenger trains running between Lahore and Delhi stop there. Shunting goods wagons spending a considerable time with their whistling fill the atmosphere of this village. “All this has made Mano Majra very conscious of trains”. (3). Thus, the train, a symbol of both the society involved in the movement and of an uprooted community is closely linked with Mano Majra.

Thus the train, so far as it embodies the motif of life, is a dual symbol representing life as well as death. On the one hand, it symbolises life and action and on the other, it stands for death and destruction. The scene of the train from Pakistan, which brings in countless corpses to Mano Majra is really heart-rendering. The setting and appearance of the train are in tune with its ominous atmosphere resembling a funeral. A normal train has a bright headlight whereas this train from Pakistan has no headlight at all. “There were no lights on the train. The engine did not whistle. It was like a ghost.” (82). This ghostly train is a symbol of disaster, destruction and death.

The novelist remarks that when umpteen corpses were burned, “red tongues of flame leaped in to the black sky”(88). The red tongues of flame typifies the poisonous and aggressive nature of the snake and show how in the heat of destructive lunacy, men turn into venomous reptiles and spout poison. When another train loaded with the dead bodies arrived, the Deputy Commissioner decided to bury the dead. A heavy bulldozer was used. The dehumanisation of life is symbolically shown in the massive mechanical burial. (Shahane 348 & 349).
Surabhi Banerjee in her brilliant article “A Myth Demolished” observes: “The train is most effectively stylised as a leit-motif in order to reinforce and accelerate some significant subsidiary items… it is structurally organic and always recognisable. As the novel proceeds, the to and fro movements of the train radiate associated ideas” (A Man Called Khushwant Singh, 134). The critic concludes that the train is a pervasive symbol and a principal rhythm in the novel.

Symbolic treatment of the idea of Hindu Trinity of gods through the three major characters of the novel is yet another significant aspect noted by critics like S.C. Harrex. It is a well-known fact that according to Hindu pantheon the gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva represent the three prime acts of creation, preservation and destruction respectively. The role played by Jugga, Hukum Chand and Iqbal correspond to the role of these gods. Jugga is the creator. Hukum Chand is the preserver of peace and Iqbal is the destroyer of superstition, worn-out old practices and stifling tradition.

Haydn More Williams in his brilliant book Studies in Modern Indian Fiction remarks that the three central characters -- Iqbal, Jugga and Hukum Chand symbolically represent three aspects of modern India. Iqbal represents the youthful radical idealism linked with Marxist ideology whereas Jugga stands for the animal passion and earthliness of ordinary India. Hukum Chand, the government official, is a representative of corrupt bureaucracy.

Humour cannot be divorced from Khushwant Singh. Once Khushwant Singh humbly said: “I had no illusion about my being a good teacher or a great writer. But I always managed to raise a laugh whenever I spoke. I am a born jester” (Need for a New Religion and Other Essays, 93). Humour pervades throughout the narrative. It is seen in the way in which the Muslims cringe in front of the magistrate. It can also be
seen in the movement and manner of Iqbal. The savagery with which Jugga attacks Malli’s gang is presented with a touch of Dickensian humour. The ludicrous figure of the young leader and his clownish bearing produce humour. Iqbal, to while away his time, reads the matrimonial advertisements published in a newspaper. It reflects the mindset of the Punjabi youth. The ads indicate that all of them wanted pure virgins. A few “broad minded” gentlemen were willing to consider young widows but only if they had not been deflowered. But all of them were unanimous in demanding women who were good at h.h.a (household affairs). Though it is a digression, these funny advertisements provide a little relief from the tense atmosphere depicted.

There are examples of pathos. An excellent example of this is the gripping narrative in the depiction of the dead bodies in the ghost train as seen by Hukum Chand. Later, we have a ghastly but grotesque description of brutalized dead bodies floating in the river. Even hardened police officials find it hard to digest such scenes. There is sublime pathos in the final sacrifice of Sabhrai who feels the presence of guiding hand of Guru at the last moment of her life. The gun men while demanding the keys from the money-lender Lala Ram Lal hits him on the face. Ram Lal spits blood, a robber stabs him in the abdomen and he collapses instantly crying loudly and dies. This pathetic scene makes the readers shed tears.

Khushwant Singh is a keen observer of Nature. He makes use of Nature in creating the atmosphere in his stories. A Train to Pakistan starts with a more oppressive summer than usual reflecting the mood of hatred and vendetta in the people. When the ghost train arrives, there starts torrential rain. When there is the gloom among the Mano Majrans, clouds in the form of billows gather in the sky, darkening the entire firmament. Towards the end of the story, the river Sutlej is in spate as if to swallow everything.