A BEND IN THE GANGES

A Bend in the Ganges (1964), one of the best novels of Manohar Malgonkar, is also selected as one of the three best novels of 1964 by E.M. Foster, the noted English novelist. He compliments it as a fine novel written in English by an Indian. Malgonkar presents here a powerful story against the background of the troublesome times of India. Rituparna Roy says, “This novel is not just one of the most popular novels written on the Partition, but it is also one of the best known texts in the whole canon of Indian English Fiction”. (Roy, 47)

The novel starts with Civil Disobedience Movement of the early 1930s and ends with the Partition riots in Punjab. It also encompasses Swadeshi Movement, the activities of the freedom fighters, the outbreak of the Second World War, the British retreat from Rangoon, the Bombay dock explosion and the division of India. The sheer massing of events may have been intended to provide the novel with epic dimensions. This prompts Mukherjee to remark that A Bend in the Ganges is a political novel “…panoramic in scope and epic in aspiration”. (Mukherjee, 59)

Khushwant Singh considers Manohar Malgonkar’s A Bend in the Ganges, a successful novel due to the number of great national events depicted by the author and praises it as one of the few books that are “…samples of good writing by Indian English writers of today”. (Singh, 284)
The mood of the novel is introduced with an epigraph – a quotation from Gandhiji, in which Gandhiji has expressed his doubts about his experiment with non-violence:

This non-violence, there seems to be due mainly to our helplessness. It almost appears as if we are nursing in our bosoms the desire to take revenge the first time we get the opportunity. Can true, voluntary non-violence come out of this seeming forced non-violence of the weak? It is not a futile experiment I am conducting? What if, when the fury bursts, not a man, woman, or child is safe and every man’s hand is raised against his neighbour? (A Bend in the Ganges, Author’s note)

The events themselves prove that the Mahatma’s fears were true and that he himself realized the futility of non-violence. In the wake of freedom, the sub-continent witnessed acts of violence and brutality which loosened the hold of civilization on men and asserted the reality of violence. A Bend in the Ganges, like Khushwant Singh’s Train to Pakistan, takes up the theme of Partition and portrays conflicting loyalties and various forces at work. The novel “…delineates with insight, penetration and utter analytical precision the uneasy transformation of colonized country into sovereign state, the difficult passage from the familiar shackles of bondage to the disturbing challenges of freedom”. (Roy, 62)
The novel portrays the communal riots which shook the very foundations of the nation on the eve of Independence and also focuses on its impact on the thought and behaviour of people. It also presents the ideological conflict between violence and non-violence which is a characteristic feature of the social and political life of the 1930s and the 1940s in India. The action of the novel starts with 1930s and extends up to the dawn of Independence in August 1947, thus covers the history of a saga depicting the movement for Independence, the World War and the Partition of India. Malgonkar has chosen a wide canvas for his novel where the action ranges from domestic to national bloodshed. As Shyam M. Asnani says:

The novelist’s purpose of describing this period seems to be two fold. The first is to introduce to the reader, as an objective chronicler, the basic ingredient of the political scene, the violent and the non-violent, the injection of the communal virus, the parting of the ways, the Muslim outcry for division, the Hindu’s answer, the Quit India phase and finally the removal of the shackles, climaxed by the creation of two separate states—India and Pakistan. The sole intention of the author is to probe in the ideology of ‘Ahimsa’, non-violence and truth offered by the Mahatma not only as political expediency, but also as a philosophy and way of life. (Asnani, 43)
Malgonkar narrates the horrible developments resulting in the wake of Partition such as the screams of the victims, the barbarous cruelties heaped on men and women and innumerable women being carried away naked, struggling and screaming at the top of their voices. Prof. Iyengar also talks about,

…the sheer frenzy that possessed people… Humanity uprooted, humanity mutilated, humanity massacred for the artistic projection of the things that happened in 1947, not even the images of Dante’s Inferno can possibly prove adequate.

(Iyengar, 324-25)

The novel mainly focusses on the transformation of three young men—Gian Talwar, Debi Dayal and Shafi Usman—as a result of their involvement in the events of the years preceding and following the Partition of India. Gian, a college student, believes in non-violence whereas Debi and Shafi, members of a terrorist outfit called the “Freedom Fighters”, believe in violence. These freedom fighters form the Hanuman Club, ostensibly for physical culture but it is really intended for terroristic activities. Dissatisfied with Gandhian non-violence, they advocate a new religion of brotherhood as they firmly believe that religious differences among the Indians contribute to their slavery.
The terrorist movement is active in Duriablad as a group of young men from different communities and provinces are united in the sacred cause against the British rule. The members of the club are nationalists and fellow-terrorists and their leader is Shafi Usman and his associate is Debi Dayal. Their secret mode of greeting is ‘Jai-ram’! and ‘Jai-rahim’!, an indication that they respect both Hinduism and Islam equally. They are representatives of those who advocate radical solutions for the ills from which India suffers. “They were all fervent patriots, dedicated to the overthrow of British rule in India. Anyone who represented that rule, British or Indian, was their enemy; anything that represented that rule was their legitimate target”. (76-77) The revolutionaries have nothing but contempt for Gandhi. They even suspect that Gandhiji’s movement is supported by the British to strengthen their base as the Indian National Congress is started by an Englishman.

Shafi Usman, a young Muslim, is dedicated to the overthrow of the British rule in India. He is motivated to terrorist activities against the British because his father was the victim of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre of 1919. He is an eyewitness to the most inhuman atrocities of the British at that time. He is of the opinion that “non-violence is a naked insult to the land of Shivaji and Akbar and Ranjeet.” (80) The members of this group are involved in removing fishplates from the
railway tracks, cut telephone wires and blow up Air Force planes with explosives. Shafi is the most ‘wanted’ man in the state and the British police has announced a reward of a thousand rupees to anyone giving information leading to his capture ‘dead or alive’. That is the reason why he disguises himself as a Sikh.

Shafi, as the leader of the group, prevents the terrorists from making thoughtless sacrifices. The terrorist movement “…was the last gasp of those who wanted to carry on the struggle united. They were all willing, almost eager, to die for their motherland, and it needed a leader of Shafi’s calibre to keep them from making thoughtless sacrifices”. (77) The revolutionaries know that the religious differences among the races of India are the root cause of the country’s slavery and the British have learnt to take the fullest advantage of these differences, playing the Hindus against the Muslims and the Sikhs against the both.

The novel opens with the slogan of “Boycott British goods”, all over the country on the call of Mahatma Gandhi, the apostle of truth and non-violence. Another powerful slogan, “Bharat Mata Ki Jai”, gives expression to the fire of freedom that was burning in the heart of the Indian masses. The ceremonial fire that raged in the market square was “…just one of hundreds of thousands of similar fires all over the country”. (Malgonkar, 11) Gandhiji and Nehru have come and Gandhiji
himself appeared on the dais, spinning cotton-wool on a brass spinning-wheel. It is a Monday, Gandhiji’s day of silence. Nehru addresses the assembled crowd to boycott British goods and adopt the Swadeshi. There is a fire in front of him into which a group of people standing around are throwing British garments. Gian Talwar, overwhelmed at the sight of Gandhiji, throws his imported blazer, his most prized possession, into the fire and finds himself repeating the slogans, “Mahatma Gandhi –ki-jai”! and “Victory to non-violence”! (13) and, thus he shows the zeal of a nationalist. He is swayed away by the conviction that non-violence is not for the weak and that “…the path of ahimsa is not for cowards”. (14)

Gian, from a poor peasant brahmin family, comes to Duriabad in the West Punjab to pursue his college studies. He makes friends with Debi Dayal, the only son of Dewan-bahadur Tekchand Kerwad, owner of Kerwad Construction Company in Duriabad. Debi Dayal belongs to a terrorist group lead by Shafi Usman. Gian receives an invitation for a picnic at Birchi-bagh from Debi and other revolutionary friends. There he meets Sundari, the sister of Debi, Shafi Usman, the leader of the terrorist group disguised as a Sikh, and Basu, also a member of the terrorist group. Though all of them come from different family backgrounds, the common denominator among them is their love for their country.
The picnic brings a clash of ideologies between Gian and Shafi on non-violence and violence. To Gian, Gandhiji is god and so he proudly announces that he is a follower of Gandhiji. He professes non-violence and affirms that, Gandhiji alone could lead India to victory. Shafi Usman ridicules Gandhiji’s creed of non-violence and declares that Gandhiji is the enemy of India’s national aspirations. He wants to know from Gian if he could give a single instance of a country which has won freedom from foreign rule through non-violence. His conviction is that,

…Freedom has to be won; it has to be won by sacrifice; by giving blood, not by giving up the good things of life and wearing white caps and going to jail. Look at America—the United States! They went to war. Turkey! Even our own Shivaji. Non-violence is the philosophy of sheep, a creed for cowards. It is the greatest danger to this country. (23)

Shafi Usman, the revolutionary leader, criticizes Gandhiji and says that Gandhiji has weakened the spirit of the people and made them all into sheep and cattle and this would only lead to the sacrifice of million. Gian declares that Ahimsa is the noblest of creeds and nothing is more sacred than it. He further adds that “…No man has the right to raise his head against another, whatever the provocation, I shall never do it. It takes greater courage; non-violence is not for the weak”. (24) Gian rejects the offer of Debi to join their group.
Later on Gian gets himself involved in a family battle with his cunning cousin, Vishnudutt, over his own land at Piploda, in his native village, Konshet. When his own brother, Hari, is being killed by Vishnudutt, Gian could not muster enough courage to interfere and stop the fight. Later he broods, sick with guilt. “Coward … coward! he kept accusing himself, fanning the flame. “Was that why he had embraced the philosophy of non-violence without question—from physical cowardice, not from courage? Was his non-violence merely that of the rabbit refusing to confront the hound?” (54) This incident shows that Gian pays only lip-service to the principle of non-violence. When faced with reality his entire idealism evaporates and shows that non-violence is an impractical philosophy and it cannot be followed in real life. This must have prompted S.C. Sood to comment that “What Malgonkar condemns is not ideals and idealism but people’s superficial adherence to them”. (Sood, 199) Later he realizes that he could have averted the bloody incident had he behaved as a brother should.

Justice is denied to Gian as the police who have been managed by Vishnudutt successfully suppress the evidence. He blindly explains away to himself his intended recantation of the Gandhian creed of non-violence: “But that was merely a political expedient—a weapon specially forged against the British; how could it serve a philosophy of life itself?” (66)
Realisation dawns on Gian that the only way of confronting the evil and feudal strength of Vishnudutt is through violence. It makes Gian to take revenge on Vishnudutt, with the same axe with which Vishnudutt murdered his brother. Thus when the situation confronts him, Gian rejects the Gandhian concept of non-violence. G.S. Amur thinks on this: “It is, obviously, part of the novel’s strategy to discredit non-violence and to demonstrate its ineffectiveness in the context of life situation”. (Amur, 104) His brother’s murder reveals to Gian the unreality of non-violence as a way of life. In his case, as in Hari’s, violence proves to be an act of liberation and self-fulfilment. Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly observes that “…non-violence for Gian was not a strongly felt creed but a temporary expedient.” (Mukherjee, 60)

This leads Gian to violate the principle of non-violence professed by Gandhiji and he sacrifices non-violence for the sake of brotherly love and duty, family prestige and sense of justice and revenge. He is given life-sentence as a punishment and is condemned to the Andamans. The family feud in the village, as Iyengar remarks, is: “Like a prologue to the main act, this story of family feud—suspicion, rivalry, hatred, vindictiveness, murder—is to be viewed as the advance micro-tragedy foreshadowing of the macro-tragedy on a national scale in the year of the Partition”. (Iyengar, 433)
Debi Dayal represents another facet of freedom struggle—the path of terrorism and violence. Convinced of his ideals and actions, Debi actively involves himself in terrorist activities and along with the members of the Hanuman Club blows up railway tracks and bridges. The motive of Debi’s hatred for the British lies wholly outside the realm of politics and is purely accidental. At the age of thirteen, Debi sees his mother being molested by a drunken British soldier. The furious Debi jumps at the British soldier and kicks him like a puppy and saves his mother from disgrace. Then Debi, vows to take revenge upon the British and even learns judo to train himself physically well. He becomes a terrorist and is wholly committed to the cause of freedom. He hates the British, “…they all hated the British; that was what brought them together, Hindus and Muslims and Sikhs, men of differing religions united in the cause of freedom as blood-brothers: the Freedom Fighters”. (73)

Debi Dayal supplies explosives from his father’s store to the terrorists who are all men of courage and resourcefulness. Shafi assigns him the task of setting fire to an aeroplane and Debi views the burning of R.A.F. aircraft as an act of self-fulfilment while for Shafi, it is just a piece of sabotage. Shafi becomes aware of Debi’s feelings as the plane goes in flames,
...Debi Dayal’s face had assumed an almost frightening malevolence, as though he were gripped by the joy of some secret fulfilment much greater than the mere burning of a plane.

...the face of the god of vengeance, gloating. (87)

Acting on the complaint received from Tekchand about the missing sticks of explosion from his stores, police could arrest only the Hindu boys of the Hanuman Club, as Shafi and his Muslim friends hide themselves from the police leaving the Hindu boys to their fate. Under the pretext of friendship, Shafi reports Debi’s presence to the police to have him arrested. Basu and other Hindu boys are also arrested and tried. Debi has been sentenced to like imprisonment in the Andamans. Shafi’s betrayal of Hindu boys reveals that by then there has been too much mutual distrust and hatred among the two communities.

A noticeable change is seen in Shafi. He, who advises his men to avenge the insult the British heaped on the Indians by making them crawl on all four, is now seen playing into the hands of Hafiz Khan, a terrorist turned fanatic. The sudden change in Shafi is symbolic of what happened to a large segment of the Muslim community at that time. Shafi’s associates are Jitin Das and Hafiz Khan, who belong to the select coterie of the first batch of terrorists. Jitin Das died in captivity in the Andamans but Hafiz Khan who lives in Bombay directs the entire
movement. He was also “…the acknowledged chief of the terrorists in India, just as Gandhiji was the chief of the National Congress”. (79) But both are just names to the members of the Freedom Fighters and their leader, for all practical purposes, is Shafi, who allottes their tasks and shares their risks and hardships.

The destinies of Gian Talwar and Debi Dayal are once again joined in the Andamans. Gian wants to settle down there with no intention of coming back to India because he considers that “…India’s problems are no longer his problems”. (119) Debi, on the other hand, desires to get back to India to finish his “interrupted work” and to join hands with the others in the ceaseless fight against the British. In the Andamans, Gian stoops to lead a life of lies and deceitful deeds. He cringes before his superiors and oppresses his subordinates. His admiration for the British and their standards of justice makes him to co-operate with Patrick Mulligan, the Jail Superintendent. At his instance, he acts as a spy on Debi who continues to hate the British. Gian offers to help Debi to escape from the prison and at the critical moment betrays him by blowing the whistle and gets him flogged for trying to escape from the jail. Gian’s betrayal does not affect Debi’s mission but rather makes him a prisoners’ hero, while Gian himself becomes the most despicable man on the criminals’ colony. Contemptuously Debi wonders:
...Was Gian the man, ...the non-violent disciple of Gandhi who had been convicted for murder? ...Gian was not certainly the man. He was typical of the youth of India, vacillating, always seeking new anchors, new directions, devoid of any basic convictions. ...He had already jettisoned non-violence; how far would he go with truth? (161)

Gian offers to help Debi again to escape from the prison to make amends for his betrayal. But Debi rejects the offer, “I would willingly rot in a cell here rather than associate with someone like you and become free”. (205) Gian’s moral debasement is total when he cuts the neck of a corpse to get gold sovereigns without any scruples. When the Japanese seize the Andamans, Mulligan and other Europeans escape from the island and being an opportunist, Gian also escapes to India with their help.

Debi also could have easily escaped as the island was deserted by the British. But he looks to the Japanese with hope and to attain freedom for India, he is willing to co-operate with them. Very soon he learns that the Japanese are no better than the British and is disillusioned. When the Japanese ask him to prepare the way for their march into India, Debi could foresee the havoc they are going to cause to many poor Bengali villagers. Yet he accepts the task only to get back to India to continue his fight for the freedom of India.
Gian conceals his identity and changes his name as Maruti Rao in Madras to get a hotel room and Gian Joshi in Bombay to get a job. He earns his livelihood in Bombay through Debi’s father and sister as a shipment supervisor for their Kerwad Construction Company. Tekchand and Sundari come to know that he had been with Debi in the Andamans Jail.

Debi Dayal is a terrorist because he is an ardent lover of Mother India and he believes in the use of arms and ammunition against the mighty British Empire. He seems to be the follower of Bhagat Singh, Azad and other martyrs in the cause of the country, who follow the path of violence in the freedom struggle. He is suspicious of Gian and is sure that Gian is a man devoid of principles and his non-violence is merely a cover for cowardice. Later on, when Gian approaches Debi Dayal he refuses to make a compromise with circumstances which his conscience does not allow. He is dedicated and firm in his ideological conviction, and does not deviate from his purpose. He ruins himself in the prison while Gian, by hook or crook succeeds. The destinies of both, Debi and Gian, as Meenakshi Mukherjee remarks:

…are shaped by two factors: the forces of history, and the elements of their personalities. Gian who adopts his policy to suit every circumstance, by cringing, deceiving, humiliating himself, bending with every wind, finally
withstands the storm, while Debi Dayal is broken because he refuses to make a compromise with circumstances”.

(Mukherjee, 25)

The novel portrays very strongly the communal poison that gradually converts Shafi into a fanatic. The Congress and the Muslim League have come to a final parting of ways with Hindus and Muslims separated into opposite camps, learning to hate each other with the bitterness of ages. Even their own leaders have begun to take sides. Hafiz writes a complaint to Shafi about the callousness of the Hindus towards the Muslims, suggesting that they should re-orientate their activities. “… How long would it be before the flames of communal hatred caught up with them?” (86) He is won over by absolute and fanatic Muslim considerations. Hafiz asks Shafi to concentrate his activities not against the British but against the Hindus since they are their real enemies.

Hafiz Khan shows Shafi a number of paper cuttings reporting the atrocities committed by Hindus on Muslims. The battle cry against the Hindus comes to Duriabad with the cuttings from the *Dawn*, *Trident*, the *Awaz*, the *Sulah* and *Subha*. In his secret meeting with Shafi, Hafiz tries to impress upon him the fear that, in the absence of the British rule, the Muslims would have to live as inferior citizens and as the slaves of the Hindus. The lives, property and religion of the Muslims would be in
danger, as the majority would be Hindus. Jinnah’s change into an orthodox Musalman, standing up for the land only for the Muslims and expressing hatred for the Hindus, is exemplary for the Muslims. Referring to Jinah’s warnings, Hafiz says to Shafi:

I am not a Leaguer only because the League does not believe in our methods. But there is no denying that Jinah is a great man. He has pointed out the way. We must now turn our back on the Hindus, otherwise we shall become their slaves! (94)

Rejecting Hafiz’s outburst initially Shafi remarks that, “The Hindus can never constitute a danger to the Muslims not here in the Punjab. Never! Only fanatics can believe such nonsense”. (95) Hafiz reacts violently to Shafi’s words, “…Fanatics! We have to turn fanatic in sheer self-defence…” (95) He tries to make it clear to Shafi that the Hindus are a danger everywhere. The Muslims are considered second rate citizens in the Congress-dominated states. The inclusion of one or two Muslims in the government is a big farce. They don’t think that they are safe in Hindu nation, and hence they need a separate safe state—their own homeland. Muslims accept Jinnah as their political leader and Pakistan is their promised land. Hafiz voices the Muslim view – the inevitability of the Partition of India for the welfare of the Muslims—when he tries to dispel the feelings of national solidarity from the mind of Shafi Usman in a forceful religious fervour:
…One or Two! Are we to be satisfied with crumbs? We who ruled the whole country? Have we now become dogs? And who are the one or two? Who—I ask you? Stooges—their own men. Muslims who are members of the Congress, renegades. Don’t you know that the Congress will not have any one who is not a member? That is what will happen here too. You will find a Congress ministry—a Hindu Ministry with a couple of Muslims who are obedient servants of the Congress. Even today, there are Congress administrations in eight of the eleven provinces. What is happening? They will not take any Muslim who will not join them. Jinnah has exposed them: ‘The Hindus have shown that Hindustan is for the Hindus’. Now we Muslims have to look after ourselves. Organize ourselves before it’s too late. Carve out our own country… (95)

These words of Hafiz reflect the way of thinking of the Muslim leaders of those times and also the influence they exert on the minds of orthodox Muslims. He fans hatred and ill-will against the Hindus because of their hateful deeds in the provinces where they ruled had paled Jallianwalla tragedy into insignificance. The freedom obtained by the Hindu domination is undesirable to them. Gradually influenced by the words of Hafiz, Shafi gives up his secular outlook and becomes a violent communalist thirsting for the Hindu blood. Hafiz warns Shafi:
...We don’t want freedom if it means our living here as slaves of the Hindus. If we succeed in driving out the British, it is the Hindus who will inherit power. Then what happens to us? We are heading for a slavery far more degrading … struggling for it. That’s what Jinnah is worried about. That’s what all of us are worried about. (96)

When Shafi feels that the only way to free the nation from slavery lies in communal harmony, Hafiz refers to the Dassera riots in the congress-ruled states where the police actually sided with the Hindus: “… I saw policemen shooting down Muslims, picking them out”. (97) and also narrates that during Muharram riots, eighteen men died by police fire and seven people got injured and all these people are none but Muslims. It shows that the police pick out only the Muslims and kill them. Injecting the bitter communal hatred in Shafi, Hafiz says that they had to prepare themselves for a civil war because their enemy were no more the British but only the Hindus who would become the rulers once the British leave.

Shafi, who stands for communal solidarity finds it irreconcilable to get himself ready for the civil war. Still unconvinced, he would prefer Gandhiji’s movement to communalism. This makes Hafiz condemn Gandhiji as a hypocrite who conceals violence in the garb of non-violence. To convince Shafi, Hafiz denounces Gandhiji thus:
...In the midst of Gandhi’s non-violence, violence persists.

Violence such as no one has ever seen. That is what awaits this country: the violence bottled up in those who pay lip service to non-violence. The Hindus are preparing for it—to kill us, to swamp us. (98)

This conversation between Hafiz and Shafi is significant because it reflects the Muslims’ change in thinking even before the Partition of the country. It also expresses their fear of Hindu rule once the British quit India. Once devoted to communal solidarity, Muslims now have become fanatics working only for the cause of the Muslims. Thus Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Jinnah and others who first worked for national solidarity have now become champions of the Muslims. They are ideal Muslims to be emulated for Shafi Usman and accordingly, being once a “staunch nationalist” and a “firm believer in secularism”, Shafi now eagerly joins the Muslim League following in the footsteps of Ahmed Khan and Jinnah.

Thus the Hindu-Muslim rift penetrates into the terrorist group of Hanuman Club and as a result, having got secret information from the police about their plan to raid the Hanuman Club, Shafi and the other Muslim boys escape without informing the Hindu boys. The British police officer on board the ship refers to this incident and talks about this rift among the terrorists to the captain of the ship with Debi as a prisoner sailing to Andamans.
... When our men raided the place, only seven were there. The others had fled. It is rather funny, really; all seven were Hindus; not a single Muhammadan in the lot; which makes us think that there was some kind of a rift among them... (137)

Shafi’s betrayal of the Hindu members of the Hanuman Club creates a gulf between the two communities resulting in a violent communal strife. The entire Hanuman Club is, in fact, a replica of the Indian nation at the time of Partition. To quote Padmanabhan, “Thus, the Hanuman Club becomes a microcosm of the macrocosm that was Indian society, with the Hindus and the Muslims united at first to fight against the British, and, at last when they were about to leave, fighting against each other”. (Padmanabhan, 110) Debi never renounces his bitter feeling that it was his own father who reported to the police. Consequently, the two persons he hates most are Shafi, his terrorist friend and Tekchand, his father.

Debi Dayal’s desire to take revenge upon Shafi reflects the deep seated ill-feelings between Hindu and Muslim communities. Tekchand, father of Debi, is also conscious of the Hindu-Muslim rivalry. He knows that the bitterness which exists between the two communities would never permit them to live in harmony. He is one of those millions who feels that the presence of the British is necessary to keep the nation quiet and away from the horrors of the civil war. He knows that “In the chaos
that would follow the withdrawal of British authority, Hindus and Muslims would be at each other’s the throat just as they had always been before the British came and established peace. Men like Churchill were not fools; the alternative to the British quitting India was civil war”. (253)

The mutual hatred between Debi and Shafi helps Malgonkar “…to trace the psychological ripening of religious fanaticism”. (Kalennikova, 188) which comes as a curse on the national life of India during the freedom struggle. Shafi is at first conscious of the sweeping wave of religious hatred. He tells his men that Gandhiji and Jinnah have both played into the British hands and destroyed secularism, the saving grace of nationalism.

…The only saving grace of the nationalist movement has gone, it is no longer united, no longer secular. The Hindus and the Muslims are both going their own ways, both trying to propagate non-violence. They themselves were the elite, having smashed down the barriers of religion that held other Indians divided; blood brothers in the service of the motherland. (78)

As the Second World War breaks out, the Indians entertain a hope that they would be liberated by the Japanese. Ironically the Indians living on the Island realize that the Japanese, who liberated them, are far more oppressive and tyrannical than the British. The Japanese have not
hesitated to subject the Indians to any kind of misery. Debi returns to India sent by the Japanese who want him to work as a fifth columnist and to set up a new terrorist movement. Debi also longs to return to India, not to do as the Japanese want him to do but to continue the freedom struggle. So he pretends to be in the hands of the Japanese and returns to India with their help. Then like Gian, he also changes his identity, takes a new name as Kaluram and withdraws himself into the tea gardens in the north-western corners of Assam, to work as a stockman and wait for the Japanese and the British to fight out their battle for India. “…He wanted nothing of either the British or the Japanese. For the moment he was prepared to sit back and wait, while the titans fought out their battle for India”. (276)

Debi is aware that a great change has come over him but he does not know what it is and how it has happened:

…he wondered whether all the exposure to what Gandhi had described as man’s inhumanity to man had converted him to his doctrine of non-violence. Or was it just his feeling of revulsion against his fellow-Indians, men like Shafi, the Brigadier and Gian Talwar, that had made his spirit curdle?. (277)

Debi waits for the British—Japanese war to end for resuming his struggle for the freedom of the country. Till then he decides to maintain a low profile. Even his personal revenge on Shafi will have to wait. He
is happy that he is back in India to continue his struggle for India’s freedom.

There is seething discontent everywhere. The masses of India are angry for the arrest of their leaders *en masse*. They also feel offended by the presence of the Japanese army on the subcontinent. The British government has taken repressive measures and as part of them, Gandhi and Nehru have been served with prison sentences. The aggressive government has decided to settle the issue by suppressing the upsurge of the people. Those leaders who could prepare the people for a non-violent response are secretly locked up in prisons. All this led to the violent outburst of the people.

Debi Dayal, who is eager to continue the freedom struggle waits till the War is over and goes to Calcutta to meet the founder members of the erstwhile terrorist group at Duriabad. It is only through Basu that Debi becomes aware of the rise of communal hatred between the Hindus and the Muslims in India. The British have succeeded in making the Hindus and the Muslims the die-hard enemies of one another. Debi regrets that “…It is almost as though just when they are on the point of leaving the country, the British have succeeded in what they set out to do. Set the Hindus and Muslims at each other’s throats. What a lovely sight!”. (297)
The living demonstration of the rise of communal hatred in India is seen on the face of Dipali, wife of Basu. Once very beautiful, Dipali is now a horrid sight with skin on one side of the face puckered up and with eye sight gone and in its place a small pink slit like a wound is still open. This is evidently an attack by a Muslim with an electric bulb filled with sulphuric acid thrown at her face. “Who else? Who would attack a Hindu house? When a race riot starts, it is the time for settling private scores”. (298) The electric bulb, filled with sulphuric acid, is the standard weapon used during the Hindu-Muslim riots. The disfiguring of Dipali’s face symbolizes “…what has happened to the face of India—the mutilation of a race conflict”. (298) Basu, who seeks vengeance on Muslims, defense the Hindu Mahasabha call to the Hindus to rise and strike giving up their creed of non-violence to save themselves.

The communal riots give rise to mutual distrust and hatred. While the Muslims stand for Jinnah and work for the division of the country, the Hindus stand for the Congress and work for the unity of the country. Heartbroken Basu says:

… What had been aimed against the British, has turned against itself. And the ugliest thing it has bred is distrust. No Hindu can trust a Muslim any more, and no Muslim trusts a Hindu. The country is to be divided. That is what Jinnah wants; that is what the Muslims want. But before that
division comes, every town, every village, is being torn apart. The Muslims don’t want freedom for India unless it means the carving out of a separate state for themselves. They fear the Hindus will dominate them. (298)

Muslim League, headed by Jinnah, demands for a separate and independent state carved out of India. The British seem to be favourabale to this and if it materializes Muslims turn out to be blood-thirsty foes of the Hindus. Basu thinks of the horrors and chaos that await the exit of the British from India and also anticipates the slaughter of people, rape, abduction, and mutiliation of a hundred thousand women. This fear is reflected in the words of Basu:

… The moment the British quit, there will be civil war in the country, a great slaughter. Every city, every village, every bustee, where the two communities live side by side, will be the scene of war. Both sides are preparing for it, the Hindus and the Muslims. The Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha are both militant… (299)

Basu tells Debi that non-violence is only “…a pious thought, a dream of the philosophers” and that “… mankind is not prepared for true non-violence”. (299) He wants the Hindus to prepare themselves against the Muslims as he fears that the Hindus would perish if they fail to return violence for violence. He points out Gandhi’s fears when he
quotes his words that form an epigraph to the novel: “...when the fury bursts, not a man, woman or child is safe and every man’s hand is raised against his neighbour?” (299) Basu firmly believes that violence has to be met with violence otherwise Hindus will perish. If non-violence is effective against the British it is only because of their inherent decency. But if the same non-violence is turned against the brute force, it is sadly helpless. Thus he wants the Hindus to rise against the Muslims. The conversation between Debi and Basu demonstrate, the cruel ways that men of both the communities in India resort to during the pre-Independence days. The Muslims’ demand for separate nation is at its highest pitch and both the communities are determined to wage a civil war.

Hindus and Muslims being traditional enemies, Shafi rules out any possibility of them to live together. The spell of provincial government had demonstrated it fully. Shafi believes that Muslims are superior to Hindus but if the British leave, they become second class citizens as the Hindus are in a majority. He detests the Sikhs more than the Hindus and feels it absurd to go about as a Sikh as he once did.

Situation in India as well as the post-war international scene brought the tussle for Independence to a decisive phase. “... It was clear that the British were ready to pull out of the country. Only the terms of
transfer were to be agreed upon”. (303) Like many Muslims, Shafi too hates the Congress and freedom through Congress meant nothing to him, a belief which he shared with millions of other Muslims.

…The Congress had been desperate to grab power and create an India ruled only by the Hindus so that they could ride roughshod over the Muslims who once ruled them. It was the vengeance of sheep. The Muslims would never agree. To them independence was worth nothing unless it also ensured freedom from the domination of the Hindus. They would never live in an India where they were only a tolerated minority. (303)

The absurd conception of a separate nation that Hafiz gave to Shafi six years ago appeared now a reality as Jinnah demands for the creation of a separate state carved out of India. The fight is against the Hindus who are to be annihilated. “It was Jehad, a war sanctioned by religion; a sacred duty of every true believer”. (304) Thus, it is in this concept of Jehad, a holy religious war that the seeds of the greatest massacre of the world lie in. The path showed by Jinnah led these people who give up their faith in constitutional means. Muslims believe in creating terror as the Hindus “…would never concede their demands with grace. It was essential to draw blood, to shed blood, confront their adversaries with fire and steel, the prick of the spear”. (304)
Muslims are active in achieving their objective in Rawalpindi, Multan and Bhagalpur by driving away Hindus from their places. Muslims wanted to make sure that not a single Hindu remains in that part of India, which would constitutionally be theirs. Shafi waits for the right moment to plunge at the Hindus. He knows that the Hindus would never match to the Muslims in civil war. Estimating the Hindus, he feels that they “… were pacifists at heart, their leaders fond of extolling secularism. They were soft and shrank from bloodshed. They would never be a match for the Muslims in civil war—not even the Mahasabhaites…with all their talk of a pure India which was nothing but a retort to their own demand for a pure Pakistan. Even their militancy was a false imitation of the creed of the League”. (305)

Debi and Basu go to Lahore to take revenge upon Shafi for having betrayed them earlier and traces him in a brothel in Anarkali, Lahore. There is no fight as is expected. Neither is he repentant. He once again betrays Debi and Basu by informing the police that a runaway convict and a paroled convict are living in Sehgal Lodge. When the police raid their place, Basu’s vigilance saves them from being arrested. Basu’s suggestion of retaliation does not to appeal to Debi. He wants to avenge Shafi’s betrayal by abducting Shafi’s mistress, Mumtaj. However, after this strange revenge, Debi accepts Mumtaj as his wife
since he does not hate the Muslim community as a whole which shows his secular outlook. Padmanabhan elevates Debi as a Christ-like figure, after he stops his terrorist activities. He remarks “Malgonkar’s conception of Debi as a Christ-like figure character is evident from his truthfulness, determination, and campassion. The picture of Debi whipped on the gallows reminds us of Christ on the cross”. (Padmanabhan, 111)

If Shafi opinies that friendly relationship between the Hindus and the Muslims is imposible, Debi thinks of recapturing the love and healthy atmosphere between the Muslims and the Hindus. He soon realizes the tragedy of the nation when the division is complete and the communal hatred shows sings of a gruesome tragedy. When the riots break out all over northern India, Gian goes to Duriabad to rescue Sundari and her parents, disregarding his own safety. He redeemes himself at Duriabad by saving Sundari from being raped and murdered and helps her to come out of Pakistan. At the time of Partition, the scene at Duriabad, like those at many towns, is one of complete chaos and anarchy.

Generally, during festivals, sporadic disturbances between the Hindus and the Muslims are a common feature and the authorities deal firmly with such disturbances. The civil war during the Partition took
the shape of a religious war engulfing the whole country in an unparalleled mass destruction in the annals of Indian history. Malgonkar describes it with an explicit realism:

…A vast landscape packed with people was now being partitioned according to religious majorities; the Muslims in Pakistan, the Hindus in India… Every citizen was caught up in the holocaust. No one could remain aloof; no one could be trusted to be impartial. (341)

The author comments on the prevailing situation of mutual distrust and hatred by remarking that people of one religion cannot be expected to be friendly or sympathetic to those of the other religion, especially when they are subjected to inhuman atrocities by them. “What men and women of your own religion were being subjected to atrocities, you could not be expected to remain friendly with adherents to the religion of the oppressors”. (341)

The administration and the police, even the armed forces—all are caught up in this fire of ill-will and hatred. Religious civil war is waged all over the country and it is a shameful, tragic sight. Every village, town and city that is peopled with the two communities turned into a battle field. Terrible things happened due to the Partition:
Tens of millions of people had to flee, leaving every thing behind; Muslims from India, Hindus and Sikhs from the land that was soon to become Pakistan: two great rivers of humanity flowing in opposite directions along the pitifully inadequate roads and railways, jamming, clashing, colliding head-on, leaving their dead and dying littering the landscape. (341)

The colossal massive exchange of population, the mad killings, the rapes and the abductions, at the time of Partition resulted in barbaric scenes. Animality in man became dominant, and all values suddenly collapsed. “Mobs ruled the streets, burning, looting, killing, dishonouring women and mutilating children; even animals sacred to the other communities became the legitimate targets of reprisals.” (341-42)

As Gandhiji has already feared, the long awaited freedom brought misery to millions. The pre-Independence scene is horrible: “… The entire land was being spattered by the blood of its citizens, blistered and disfigured with the fires of religious hatred; its roads were glutted with enough dead bodies to satisfy the ghouls of a major war”. (342) The escape from Duriabad is not possible and there is fear of being cut to pieces on the road by people mad with hatred. Tekchand is unable to visualize such things in the twentieth century world. Gandhiji has become ineffective and irrelevant. The moment the grip of British power
on India loosened, the people of the country discarded non-violence overnight and “…were now spending themselves on orgies of violence which seem to fulfil some basic urge”. (342) Ironically, this violence is not used against the British to free India from the British rule but is used by the two major communities of India to resort to murder, plunder and rape due to sheer hatred and distrust for each other.

Dhan Singh, the driver of Tekchand, lives in a muslim dominated area and hence, he wants to shift his family to Tekchand’s servant quarter for safety. Unfortunately, the car is stopped by a Muslim crowd, and “…Dhan Singh’s wife and children were dragged out. They stoned the children to death in front of their parents, and then poured petrol over DhanSingh’s hair and beard and burned him alive. After that they had taken his wife away”. (343)

Tekchand who is shocked at the massacre of his driver’s family becomes panicky when he finds that all his servants have run away leaving him, his wife and their daughter Sundari, who has come from Bombay leaving her husband forever. Durababad has turned into a peculiar riot-torn town and the cries of human beings have become familiar sight for Tekchand and his family: “…Even from their bedroom window, they could see the red glow in the sky, like a winter sunset, the glow caused by the houses burning in the city, and now and then they
could hear the roar of the mob, like the din of a migrating swarm of bees, punctured by shrieks, catcalls and the occasional report of firearms”. (344)

Gradually life has become more dangerous and insecure as normal life is totally paralysed. No bank functions and the town is without milk. All the Saiwal cows are killed, because they belonged to the gowalas. The convoy to Jullundur, escorted by the army right up to the border, is delayed by two days and there is no sign of it. Despite changed circumstances and the unexpected ruin associated with it, Tekchand is very reluctant to leave his town to which he is very much attached to. He confesses to Sundari,

And suddenly some one had decided that this land which is mine should be foreign territory—just like that! And merely because some hooligans take it into their heads to drive all the Hindus away from their land, I have to leave everything and go, pulled out by the roots, abandoning everything that has become a part of me. (347-348)

He is surprised to see how religion causes barriers among human beings and turns them to foes of one another. But he hopes of better times when people would come to their senses. So he wants to stay back and send his wife and Sundari with the convoy. He learns that the police wait for the convoy of the Muslims from Delhi to arrange a convoy of
the Hindus from Duriabad. The news of the killing of the Muslims on
the other side of the border is disgusting. The Inspector makes it clear to
Tekchand that violence would be returned with violence. “…Everything
depends upon how they treat our people on the other side. I hear a train
was attacked in Patiala by the Sikhs; a convoy butchered in Amritsar. If
that sort of thing is allowed to happen, how can we protect the Sikhs
here from the mobs?…” (350) It is a great relief to Tekchand to receive
an invitation from Sardar Avtar Singh to stay at his house along with
fifty Sikhs, a dozen men among them, with firearms for protection.
However, the second call from Avtar Singh tells him that the house is
put on fire and evidently all are perished in the fire.

The Partition riots find Debi again active, not at the political level
but at the personal. Debi tries to go to Duriabad along with his wife in a
Muslim refugee train to rejoin his family. This unfolds scenes of train-
disasters that preceded and followed the Partition. The trains, which
consist of a hotchpotch of passenger carriagers, cattle wagons and
timber flats are packed to maximum capacity and protected by military
jawans—presented pathetic sight.

The Partition and the freedom of India brings misery to millions
of people on both the sides of the border for no fault of their own.
Malgonkar shows the plight of the displaced when he describes the
people being carried away to Pakistan in the train, the land most of them had never seen and the land that promised relief to them. Their plight is horrible. They are now refugees fleeing from their own places leaving behind their lands, houses, cattle, household goods etc. “They fled without caring for the weak or the lame who had fallen by the way side, unable to withstand the rigours of the migration”. (365) The horrible violence reminds Debi of Shafi words, “A million shall die”, (365) as a result of violence hidden in the midst of non-violence. Independence is only three days away and Debi wonders, “…How many men and women would have been killed by that time and how many women abducted?”. (366)

The train services are disturbed and both Hindu and Muslim workers on either side had run away to save their lives. The journey of Debi along with his wife, Mumtaz from Kernal to Pakistan presents the terrible sight of general massacre. It is “…a scene of massacre, transformed by some trick of the morning light into a mirage. “…The vultures, the dogs and the jackals emerged, strutting disdainfully”. (370)

Disguised as a Muslim under the assumed name, Karim Khan, Debi is rather safe in the Indian Territory. But as the train enters territory of Pakistan on the dawn of the 15th of August, Hindus travelling like Debi in elaborate disguises had to face the wrath of communal
frenzy. Hindu men are identified and killed while their women are taken away. Debi’s disguise is also found out and he is stripped naked, blinded and killed. He who has given up violence long ago, falls a victim to the violence of a mob on the very day that brings freedom to the two countries. The last thing Debi sees is “…the rising sun in the land of five rivers on the day of their freedom”. (380) His wife is snatched away from Debi and he could only “…see her being carried away, naked and struggling, screaming at the top of the voice”. (380) Malgonkar has shown “self consuming nature of violence” (Rajagopalachari, 65) through the deaths of Debi and Shafi, who worship violence. Debi is killed in Hindu-Muslim conflict and Shafi is killed by Sundari in an attempt to protect herself.

The communal riots break out in Punjab with horrible repercussions on either side of the border. He feels that it is his responsibility to be with Sundari and her parents in a predominantly Muslim village in the West Punjab, because he truly loves Sundari. Shafi and his friends raid Tekchand’s house to abduct Sundari in retaliation for Mumtaz, who is taken away by Debi, in a spirit of revenge. Tekchand pleads with Shafi not to touch ladies and insult gods and that they should be like Shafi’s sisters. Shafi objects to the use of the word ‘sisters’ and turns on him viciously: “Is that how you Hindus treated our women? Like sisters and mothers! They were raped in front
of their own men; in Nabha, Patiala; in Delhi itself. Raped, mutilated—they weren’t sisters then!”. (388-389) In the ensuing struggle, Sundari’s mother is killed. Sundari and Gian kill Shafi with an image of Shiva and depart to join the convoy setting out of Pakistan. Deeply attached to his place and house, Tekchand drops out of the way leaving Sundari and Gian to reach India.

Thus, the centuries–old ties of fraternity are shattered leading to the mass massacre of people in the name of religion. It seems Malgonkar, subtly, raises the question whether it is Gandhiji who is a failure ultimately for having failed to resist Partition with his non-violence or it is the British who have accomplished successfully their plan of Partition.

...After living as brothers over so many generations, how had they suddenly been infected by such virulent hatred for each other? Who won, Gandhi or the British? For the British at least had foreseen such a development. Or had they both lost through not having allowed for structural flaws in the human material they were dealing with? Had Gandhi ever envisaged a freedom that would be accompanied by so much suffering and release so much hatred? Had he realized it might impose transfer of population unparalleled throughout history?. (366)
Malgonkar ironically remarks that even if the movement and the masses had been led by the terrorists as the leaders, the outcome would have been the same. As Debi, the idealistic terrorist leader, broods at the end when the two streams of shamed humanity flow in opposite directions: “Yet, What was the alternative? Would terrorism have won freedom at a cheaper price and some how still kept the Hindus and Muslims together? Perhaps not. But at least it would have been an honest sacrifice, honest and manly not something that had sneaked upon them in the garb of non-violence”. (366)

While depicting the horror and futility of the Partition riots, Manohar Malgonkar examines, at great length, the validity of ideologies of violence and non-violence in the context of the Indian freedom struggle and their relevance to life. The novel critiques the Gandhian creed of non-violence against the backdrop of violence of the Partition. The unique way of the Indian Nationalist Movement is the Gandhian creed of non-violence. At the same time, the violent mode played no less a role. It is still debatable whether the doctrine of non-violence won the freedom or the violent mode adopted by the extremists.

*A Bend in the Ganges* demonstrates that Gandhian philosophy of non-violence as a political doctrine to oust the Empire failed to some extent as it could not achieve freedom without violence. Thus it is often
said that the major theme of the novel is the rejection of the Gandhian concept of non-violence. Partition of India is associated with violence. Mobs ruled burning streets, looting, killing, molesting women and mutilating children. Even animals sacred to the other community became the legitimate targets of reprisals. The novel seems to blame the lack of vision and understanding of reality on the part of preachers of non-violence, especially Gandhi. K.K. Sharma remarks that, “A Bend in the Ganges shows Gandhi, the greatest opponent of the Partition, the staunch champion of Hindu-Muslim unity and the true devotee of non-violence, responsible for the Partition and violence in the wake of India’s independence”. (Sharma, 35)

Towards the end of the novel, through Debi, the novelist raises a question, “Who had won? Gandhi or the British? (355) This issue becomes highly debatable and generates lot of critical response. Suresh Kumar reflects that, “By raising this question at the end of the novel, Malgonkar hinted that the achievement of freedom through militant action would have been a better and honest way than the path of non-violence”. (Kumar, 158)

Some of them think that Gandhi’s message of non-violence has lost its deeper significance and that as an ideology it is ineffective in practical situations. G.S. Amur accuses Malgonkar for ignoring the non-
violence of the strong which demands a greater heroism than violence itself. (Amur, 109) Asnani joins Amur in accusing the novelist for focusing only on the superficial aspects of non-violence when it is commented that Malgonkar is “…biased and influenced by his own personal predilections”. (Asnani, 91). If Manohar Malgonkar gives such an impression that he discredits non-violence, according to James Y. Dayananda, it is mainly because he wants to tell the whole story from the point of view of his revolutionary characters who condemn non-violence as “the philosophy of sheep”. (Dayananda, 126). However, such a seemingly anti-Gandhi stand of Manohar Malgonkar is rejected by several critics who strongly believe that non-violence failed not because of its imperfections but because of corruption and lust for power among people and that the novelist is not against Gandhian creed of non-violence. N.S. Pradhan is of the view that “It is often stated that the major theme of A Bend in the Ganges is the rejection of the Gandhian concept of non-violence. …Several other critics have too easily taken the view that A Bend in the Ganges has a ‘thesis’ which is to demonstrate the utter irrelevance of the Gandhian creed of non-violence in real life. This rather superficial evaluation of the novel unjustly discredits it and deviates the reader’s attention from its depth, particularly from its central purpose of depicting individuals searching for meaning and values in a shattered, collapsing world. (Pradhan, 149)
M. Rajagopalachari strongly believes that the novelist does not favour violence in any way when he says “Mahohar Malgonkar, does not, however, uphold violence as a way of life. In the death of Debidayal, Malgonkar discards violence by revealing its self-consuming nature”. (Rajagopalachari, 58)

Malgonkar does not uphold violence as a way of life. He discards violence in the death Debi Dayal by revealing its self-consuming nature. Many believe that non-violence as an ideology is not more idealistic than being practical. But Suresh Kumar argues that, “It might have failed at the time of Partition not because of its faults but because of the persons who handled it on either side”. (Kumar, 158)

Malgonkar, at no stage, has rejected the philosophy of non-violence. On the otherhand, the novel demonstrates that violence is self-consuming and self-destructive. Gundar is of the view that “…violence only breeds violence…” (Gundar, 55) To Ambuj Kumar Sharma, the novel “…is not the refutation of Mahatma’s ideology of non-violence”. (Sharma, 68) Pradhan agrees with him when he says *A Bend in the Ganges* is a powerful indictment of violence”. (Pradhan, 153)

Mahohar Malgonkar is not blind to the limitations of non-violence as a doctrine and seeks to expose them. He appears to believe that if it
fails, it is the failure of the people who cannot carry it forwards. This is evidenced in the assertion, “mankind is not prepared for true non-violence”. (290)

And finally Malgonkar’s treatment of Gandhi’s non-violence can be summarized in the words of Madge Micheels – Cynes: “Non-violence doesn’t always work—but violence never does”. (Micheel Cynes, 6) The novel also portrays the dilemmas of innocent victims and the emotional impact of the Partition on the psyche of the individuals.

As in Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan*, Malgonkar’s *A Bend in the Ganges* also affirms the value of love as transcending all barriers against the background of horrid communal riots. Gian’s pure and unselfish love for Sundari provides him moral identity. He is no longer the earlier Gian who built his life on falsehood, but is a morally regenerated person through experience and suffering. Like Gian, Debi Dayal also seeks his refuge in love. Great humanizing force in the innocent love of Mumtaz transforms him and he finds fulfillment in the overpowering nature of love. Both Gian and Debi Dayal seek their redemption in love. Thus ultimately the affirmation is in “…the value of love which transcends violence and non-violence – the real and the unreal – and bring about freedom and fulfillment to the individuals”. (Amur, 104-105).
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