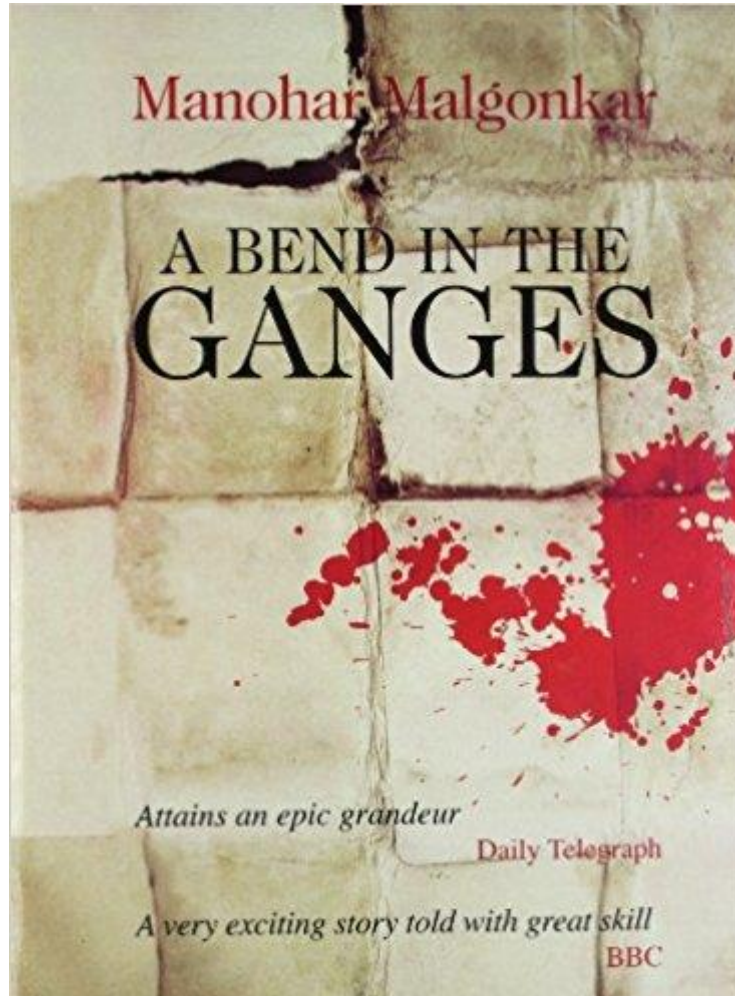


**Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges*: A Deft Blend of  
Personal, Patriotic, Partition and Communal Affairs**

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Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/Bend-Ganges-Manohar-Malgonkar/dp/8186939474>

**Abstract**

The trio – R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao - are considered as fathers of Indian English novel. Even after many decades, they are still being read and followed by promising writers since the themes and styles of these authors are as fresh as morning flower. Some novelists like Salman Rushdi, Vikram Seth, Kamala Markendeya portrayed their mother

land, India and Indian lives in their own perspective. Some of the Indian English novelists have done their rich contribution with their fruitful novels which comprise contemporary themes and events in the post-independence era. Partition of India, with its consequences, is the exciting source for the novels of some of the reputed novelists. Manohar Malgonkar stands one among those writers with his novel *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) with its influential theme of Partition, exposing personal, patriotic and partitioning events during and after India's freedom. This paper presents how Malgonkar's novel *A Bend in the Ganges* genuinely describes the charming ideas and deeds and the communal riots on the occasion of Independence.

**Keywords:** Malgonkar, independence, personal views, partitioning events, conflict.

### ***A Bend in the Ganges***

Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* exquisitely depicts the personal views of the people and partition events happened during independence. The novel presents the history of Independence movement and the Partition of India starting with 1930s and extending till the independence in August 1947. Malgonkar's preferred events for his novel are from local to national bloodshed and suffering. He describes the cruel behavior of the people at the time of the freedom movement and the Partition.

### **Three Protagonists**

There are three protagonists - Gian Talwar, Debi Dayal and Shafi Usman who are young men. The novel starts with Gian Talwar, who listens to Gandhiji's speech and influenced by that speech he throws his most prized possession- costly blazer into the fire and becomes the follower of Gandhi, believing in non-violence. He shows his eagerness as a true nationalist and a staunch follower of great ideals by the slogans, 'Mahatma Gandhiki-jai' and 'Victory to non-violence'. Debi and Shafi are active members of a group who strongly believe that only with violence they can get the things done. 'The Hanuman Club' is formed by freedom fighters for physical fitness but the real intention behind the formation of this club is to participate in violent activities. They believe that the religious differences among people weaken their unity. With this view they form a new religion with a group of young men from different communities.

The activities of the club members under the leadership of Shafi Usman are robust in Duriabad against the British. Shafi Usman, a young Muslim whose father was the victim of the Jallian wala Bagh Bloodbath, who witnesses the most merciless atrocities of the British at that time, sturdily chooses to work against the British and to break the shackles of India. Debi Dayal is Shafi's associate and their secret greeting words are 'Jai-ram: Jai-rahim' which create a feeling of equality on both Hinduism and Islam. They are the representatives to the Indians who want to make their motherland free from its miserable state in the hands of the British. The group's activities are removing fishplates from the railway tracks, cutting telephone wires and blowing up Air Force planes with explosives. Shafi, their leader, is the most 'wanted' to the British police and one thousand rupees is announced as a reward to the person who gives information about him. Shafi disguises as a Sikh not to be caught by the police

Gian, a poor brahmin young man, who comes to Duriabad for his college studies, befriends Debi Dayal. Debi and other revolutionary friends invite Gian for a picnic. At the picnic he meets Debi's sister, Sundari, Shafi Usman, disguised as a Sikh, and Basu, also a member of the terrorist group. All have different family backgrounds but the common quality is love for their country.

In the picnic when Gian declares that he is a follower of Gandhiji and non-violence alone can bring freedom to India, Shafi jeers and criticizes Gandhiji's principle of non-violence. His conviction is that non-violence is the philosophy of sheep, a creed for cowards and it is the greatest danger to this country. Gian rejects to join the group of militants stating that non-violence is the noblest of creeds. He further says 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) Later when his own brother, Hari, is killed by Vishnudutt, Gian wants to take revenge. Thus when the real life situation confronts him, he rejects the concept of non-violence in which he had a strong belief once. This incident reveals that committing to the principle of non-violence is not easy in practice, particularly when it comes to personal or familial affairs.

Debi wants to take revenge on the British as he witnesses his mother being molested by a drunken British soldier. He involves in terrorist activities along with the members of the Club. He is committed to the cause of freedom. he provides explosives to the terrorists. Shafi assigns him the task of setting fire to an aeroplane. Later, Debi and Gian again join in the Andamans. Gian wants to be there not returning to India because he now does not consider the problems of India as his problems. Debi desires to go back to India to fight, join against the British brutal reign. In the Andamans, by cooperating with Patrick Mulligan, the Jail Superintendent, to spy on Debi, Gian becomes treacherous. Venomous communal emotions pass in the minds and nerves of Hindus and Muslims. These Muslims and Hindus, having filled the feeling of hatred on each other leaders of Congress and the Muslim League, also have taken sides.

Hafiz expresses his fear to Shafi that, as majority are Hindus, the Muslims will have to live as slaves to the Hindus in the absence of the British rule; the lives, property and religion of the Muslims would be in danger. The words of Hafiz make Shafia a violent communalist who leaves his broad secular outlook and develops a thirst for the blood of Hindus. The disloyal behaviour of Shafi generates an abyss between Hindu and Muslim communities in the club that results in a violent communal fighting. It is, in fact, a facsimile of the Indian nation at the time of Partition.

Padmanabhan aptly says, "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". (110)

### **Debi with the Japanese**

When the Second World War breaks out Debi comes to India with the help of the Japanese who want him to work as their supporter. Debi also desires to return to India to

continue the freedom struggle and so he pretends that he is on Japanese side. He meets the founder members of the erstwhile terrorist group at Duriabad after the war is over. Through Basu, Debi comes to know the rise of communal hatred between the Hindus and the Muslims in India and realizes that the British government has been successful in rendering both the communities as enemies to each other.

### **Communal Murders**

In the name of community atrocities, killings, violent incidents and merciless activities take place. Dipali, the beautiful wife of Basu, is attacked by a Muslim with an electric bulb disfiguring her face. Basu, who seeks vengeance on Muslims, provokes the Hindus to give up their principle of non-violence and to be violent. The communal riots give rise to mutual distrust and hatred. While the Muslims stand for Jinnah, the Muslim League Head, who demands for a separate country for Muslims, the Hindus stand for the Congress and work for the unity of the country. As it is remarked; “*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 nonviolence, responsible for the Partition and violence in the wake of India’s independence”. (Sharma, 35)

### **Fear of Becoming Second Class Citizens**

Shafi believes that Muslims are superior to Hindus but if the British leave they become second class citizens in the domination of the Hindus. Muslims in Rawalpindi, Multan and Bhagalpur drive away Hindus from their places. Debi and Basuwant, to take revenge on Shafi, go to Lahore and trace him in a brothel. Shafi again betrays Debi and Basu by informing the police. Basu escapes from the police. Debi takes revenge on Shafi by abducting Mumtaj, Shafi’s mistress and later he accepts Mumtaj as his wife. Debi thinks of mutual understanding between the Muslims and the Hindus. He soon realises the tragedy of the nation when the division is complete. When the riots break out, Gian goes to Duriabad and saves Sundari from being raped and murdered and helps her to come out of Pakistan.

### **Disorder and Anarchism**

At the time of Partition, in many towns including Duriabad, disorder and anarchism prevails completely. Every village, town and city, with the two communities, turn into a battlefield shamefully. Murders, plundering and rapes rule the people of two communities : “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)

### **Killings**

Debi tries to go to Duriabad along with his wife in a Muslim refugee train to rejoin his family. When the train enters Pakistan on the dawn of the 15th of August, Hindu men like Debi are identified and killed and their women are taken away. Shafi is killed by Sundari in an attempt to protect herself. As a well-known writer remarks:

The destinies of both, Debi and Gian 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 102 withstands the storm, while Debi Dayal is broken because he refuses to make a compromise with circumstances (Mukherjee 25)

### Who Had Won? Any One?

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 confirms, “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”. (158)

Rajagopalachari believes “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”. (58)

Throughout the novel, with great care Malgonkar depicts personal and national events of India which occurred during the partition. His novel mirrors how innocent people faced the wrath of communal madness and how they became the victims of mob violence on the day of freedom and partition of the two countries. Malgonkar’s style of narration makes the readers see the events on the screens of their minds.

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