

## **The Fractured Psyche: A Study of Malgonkar's- A Bend in the Ganges**

**Dr. A.R. Madhusudana Reddy**

Associate Professor

G.F.G.C, Yelahanka, Bengalore

The trauma of partition of India has yet to be lived down even after forty-six years as evidenced by the recent happenings in India which need not be spelt out. Manohar Malgonkar's novel, A Bend in the Ganges, traces the changes that come over 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. While Debi and Shafi die in the outbreak of violence following India's attainment of Independence, Gian emerges as a changed person. The three young men are the members of a terrorist outfit called the "Freedom Tigers" who on the impact of the partition change in such a way that their idealism gives way to hatred and enmity.

A Bend in the Ganges starts with the burning of the imported British garments presided over by Mahatma Gandhi which makes Gian, a college student, throw into the fire his prized, costly blazer marking his conversion into a nationalist freedom fighter. Gian's action is an impulsive one suggestive of the electrifying effect that Gandhiji's exhortation has had on the people, especially on the youth. He goes to Duriabad for higher studies and makes friends with Debi, the only son of Diwan Bahadur Tekchand Kerwad, owner of the Kerwad Construction Company. Instigated by Debi, Gian joins the "Freedom Fighters" Organization headed by Shafi, the most wanted man in the State. They are soon engaged in cutting telephone wires and removing fish plates from the railway tracks as the expression of their hatred of the British. Significantly, it is at a picnic to which he is invited, Gian finds his resolve to be a follower of Gandhi challenged by a sharp retort by Shafi who says:

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. Like at America — the United States! They went to war. Turkey. Even our own Shivaji. Non-violence, the philosophy of sheep, a creed for cowards. It is the greatest danger to this country. <sup>1</sup>

It is not Shafi's disparagement of his creed of non-violence but his involvement in a family feud that turns him into a pursuer of violence. The quarrel between the Big House and the Little House (to which he belongs) because of the former's violent opposition to his grandfather's marriage to a lower class woman incenses so much as to make him murder Vishnu Dutt. Indeed,

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 the macro-  
tragedy on a national scale in the year of the partition. <sup>2</sup>

Gradually influenced by the insidious propaganda of Hafiz, the leader of the terrorist

movement, Shafi gives up his secular outlook and becomes a violent communalist thirsting for the Hindu blood. Hafiz warns Shafi:

If we succeed in driving the British, it is, the Hindus will inherit power. Then what happens to us? We are heading for a slavery far more degrading... That's what Jinnah is worried about. That's what all of us are worried about.<sup>3</sup>

When Hafiz tells him that he saw policemen shooting the Muslims in a recent Dasara riot in the Congress-ruled States, Shafi considers it as a signal for civil war which makes Hafiz say:

That is exactly what we have to prepare ourselves for, a civil war... Are we to sit back and take whatever indignities they have in store for us? We must hit back ten-fold. It is to that end that we must all work, must recognize the new enemies, the Hindus. <sup>4</sup>

Debi is caught and sentenced to life imprisonment in the Andamans when he is betrayed by Shafi during their attempt to blow up an Air Force plane with explosives stolen from Kerwad Construction Company. Returning to India with the help of the Japanese, Debi, bent upon wreaking vengeance on Shafi, meets his friend and fellow member of the terrorist group, Basu who is also seeking vengeance because his wife's face has been dis-figured during a communal riot. Significantly, the disfiguring of Basu's wife's face symbolizes "what has happened to the face of India—the mutilation of a race conflict."<sup>5</sup> 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... Before this division comes, every town, every village, is being torn apart.<sup>6</sup>

Basu defends the Hindu Mahasabha all to the Hindus to rise and strike giving up their creed of non-violence to save themselves.

Giving up his disguise as Sikh, Shafi is convinced that "the fight was no longer against the British, but against the Hindus... Jihad, a war sanctioned by religion; a sacred duty of every true believer,"<sup>7</sup> and feels that the Hindus can never be a match for the Muslims in civil war as they are pacifist at heart and "fond of extolling secularism."<sup>8</sup> In pursuance of their vengeance, Debi and Basu go to Lahore to meet Shafi. While Basu does not agree with Debi that Shafi is repentant and his assessment proves correct as they are once again betrayed by Shafi who informs the police that "a runaway convict and a paroled convict are living in -Sehgal Lodge."<sup>9</sup> The police raid their place but Basu vigilance saves them from being arrested. As an act of retaliation, Basil suggests writing to the police informing them of Shafi's whereabouts which does not appeal to Debi. Debi goes to the brothel

and takes away Shafi's mistress, Mumtaj, which makes Shafi confront him and throw an electric bulb filled with sulphuric acid at him. Catching the bulb in mid-air, Debi throws it back where Shafi is standing. Significantly, Debi decides to marry Mumtaj since he does not hate the Muslim community as a whole which shows his secular outlook.

Sentenced to life imprisonment in Andamans for murdering Vishnu, Gian meets Debi who is undergoing a similar sentence. Gian also changes so much as to steal the photographs and money sent by Sundari to her brother, Debi and to betray Debi by disclosing his plans of escape from the prison to Patrick Mulligan, the British officer in charge of their cell. This results in his being flogged for attempting to escape. Gian too, with the help of the Japanese, returns to India and meeting Sundari and her parents informs them of his friendship with Debi and secures a job with the Kerwad Construction Company at Bombay changing his name to Gian Joshi. Sundari is married but has an affair with Gian which comes to an end when Debi informs her of Gian's perfidy. However, when riots break out all over Northern India, Gian goes to Duriabad to rescue Sundari and her parents, the Tekchands, disregarding his own safety. Shafi and his friends raid Tekchand's house to snatch away Sundari and in the ensuing struggle, her mother gets killed when she tries to prevent Shafi from catching hold of Sundari. Sundari and Gian kill Shafi with an image in Tekchand's museum of rare objects of art 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. Significantly, when Tekchand pleads with Shafi not to touch the ladies who are like sisters to him and the bronze guards in his museum, Shafi objects to the use of the word 'sisters' and shouts at him:

Is that how you Hindus treat 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!<sup>10</sup>

Shafi's outburst underlines his transformation into a rabid communalist — the transformation brought about by the partition which has destroyed the age-old communal harmony that symbolizes the catholic temper of the Indians. Debi under the assumed name of Karim, decides to take Mumtaj to Duriabad in Pakistan and introduce her to his parents. But on reaching Pakistan by train his disguise is found out and killed despite the protests of Mumtaj who is taken away "naked and struggling, screaming at the top of her voice."<sup>11</sup>

Of the three fighters for freedom and one time friends, only Gian escapes with his life emerging as a changed person through his selfless act of attempting to rescue Sundari, his lady love and her parents. The partition has resulted in the fracturing of the Indian psyche. One Wonders:

After living as brothers over so many generations, how had they suddenly been infected by such virulent hatred for each other? Who had 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 they realized it might impose transfers of population unparalleled throughout history.<sup>12</sup>

The wonder may give place to despair unless the Indians unflinchingly adhere to their creed of secularism which alone can resolve the division in their country's soul.

### Notes and References

1. Manohar Malgonkar, "A Bend in the Ganges" (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1964), p. 18.
2. K.R. SrinivasaIyengar, "Indian Writing in English" (Bombay : Asia Publishing House, 1973), p. 433.
3. Manohar Malgonkar, p. 90.
4. Ibid, p. 91.
5. Ibid, p. 289.
6. Ibid, p. 290.
7. Ibid, p. 295.
8. Ibid, p. 296
9. Ibid, p. 105.
10. Ibid, p. 360.
11. Ibid, p. 368.
12. Ibid, p. 354.