

## IDEOLOGICAL CONTOURS OF (NON)VIOLENCE: READING MALGONKAR'S *A BEND IN THE GANGES*

**Dr. Ashok Verma**

Associate Professor

Department of English

Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila Vishwavidyalaya  
Khanpur Kalan, Sonipat (Haryana)-131305

Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) is acclaimed as a powerful partition novel for its authentic portrayal of the holocaust that the subcontinent witnessed at the time of partition. Undoubtedly, the novel emerges as a potent voice of the tragedy of partition wherein the novelist discusses at length two contrary ideologies and weighs them against each other. While on the one hand, there is the philosophy of non-violence as propagated by Mahatma Gandhi and the overwhelming popularity it caught instantly, there is an equally strong undercurrent of violence which pervades throughout the narrative. Malgonkar does exceptionally well in providing space to both the 'voices' and allowing them to grow on their own through the course of the novel. One voice, that of non-violence, is represented by Gian Talwar—the unheroic hero of the novel—whereas the extremist voice gets manifested in the characters of Debi-dayal and Shafi Usman. Thus, the novel becomes an arena of two ideologies at work for the common cause of Indian independence. The question as to which ideology emerges victorious at the end is debatable even today.

Louis Althusser, the famous twentieth century critic and theorist, distinguishes between the Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) in his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses". Whereas the former are formed by the police, the courts and the army, the latter, and the more stable means of consolidation of the regime get manifested in institutions like schools, colleges, churches, trade-unions and political parties. While the RSAs act as the last resort for the government, it is actually the ISAs that spread the dominant ideology far and wide; allowing it to percolate deep down to the very bottom. Further, RSAs represent the public domain, thus belong primarily to the outer world. The ISAs however are mostly private and have more easy access to the private life of the individual. In the novel, the RSAs manifest themselves in the form of the repressive measures undertaken by the colonial British regime. Therefore, the primary focus is on the parallel ISAs represented by the regime on one hand and the Indian leaders on the other hand. In fact, the novel deals with the currents and undercurrents of the ideologies of violence and non-violence represented by two bands of freedom fighters.

The ideological conflict between violence and non-violence characterizes the story throughout. It becomes apparent at the very outset when the author juxtaposes the "Epigraph" of the novel with the "Author's Note". While the former quotes Gandhi doubting the outcome of his philosophy of non-violence, the latter openly declares that "only the violence in this story happens to be true." Further, the author questions the relevance of the philosophy of non-

violence as it ultimately led to more violence: “What was achieved through non-violence, brought with it one of the bloodiest upheavals of history...” The contrast between the assertive tone of the “Author’s Note” and the note of self-doubt in Gandhi’s statement in the “Epigraph” is interesting to note in the language and tone of the epigraph:

This non-violence, therefore, 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 seemingly forced non-violence of the weak? Is it 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?

Even a cursory reading of the above lines reveals that Gandhi himself was not convinced about the success of his experiment with non-violence. He was aware of the possible failure of his experiment at the hands of those who practice non-violence only because it is convenient to them. Moreover, he was aware of the intrinsic violent nature of man. In this way, the epigraph introduces the reader to all important facets of the ideological debate that is to find ample manifestation in the novel.

Both the documents, thus, serve as a preparatory ground hinting at the possibility of colossal violence during the course of the novel. The author’s declaration comes true shortly after as the novel opens on a note of violence. Ironically, the followers of the apostle of non-violence are indulging in a kind of violence by burning the British garments. The first chapter introduces the reader as well as Gian Talwar to the ideology of non-violence. Mesmerized by the divine presence of Gandhi, he internalizes the words spoken in favour of non-violence as if under a spell: “Mahatma Gandhi-ki jai! Bharat-mata ki jai! The path of ahimsa is not for cowards.” (p.10)

The very next chapter, however, puts Gian’s creed to a tough test. Shafi and his friends ruthlessly unsettle Gian’s newly-acquired belief in non-violence. The picnic spot witnesses a clash of ideologies as Shafi is not ready to accept Gian’s pleadings. He asks Gian if he could quote a single instance from History of a country that has won freedom from foreign rule through non-violence. His ideological base is quite sound as he argues:

...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. (18)

Gian, on the other hand, finds himself defenseless as he gropes for a logical ground for his belief in non-violence except that Gandhiji is a god and that he alone can lead India to victory. Shafi scoffs at Gandhi’s creed of non-violence and declares that it has weakened the spirit of the people and made them all into sheep and cattle which would only multiply the sacrifices needed to liberate the nation. “A million shall die, I tell you—a million!” (19) Shafi warns. Gian tries to defend his stance, though not very convincingly, by proclaiming 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 hand against another, whatever the provocation, I shall never do it. It takes greater courage; non-violence is not for the weak”. (19)

Even if Gian says thus, it appears as if he were just repeating the words of the speaker in the first chapter. He is found faltering in his convictions. Having thus set the tone of the novel, Malgonkar allows the story to take its course. Gian fails in his very first test as he is unable to

withstand the pressure of a violent situation leading to his brother's murder at the hands of Vishnudutt. Later on, he is overcome with a deep sense of filial duty and introspects: "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?" (50) The incident provides an opportunity not only for Gian but for the reader to know him better. It reveals how shallow and hollow Gian's convictions are. When faced with reality his entire idealism evaporates and non-violence appears to him an impractical philosophy which cannot be followed in real life. "But that was merely a political expedient—a weapon specially forged against the British; how could it serve a philosophy of life itself?" (61)

Gian, therefore, violates the principle of non-violence professed by Gandhi and he sacrifices non-violence for the sake of brotherly love and duty, family prestige and sense of justice and revenge. He prefers to move out of his garb of non-violence and kills Vishnudutt. Obviously, in this situation, violence proves to be an act of liberation and self-fulfilment for him. He may have avenged upon his brother's murderer, but he stands exposed. He shows how skin-deep his convictions about non-violence are. Thus, Gian presents himself to be an epitome of non-violence of the weak, proving Shafi's predictions about him. Debi-dayal, on his way to the Andemans, is reminded of the picnic-spot discussion between Shafi and Gian. He cannot help reflect on Gian's wavering mindset:

... Was Gian the man, Debi wondered, the non-violent disciple of Gandhi who had been convicted for murder? He cursed and shook his head in disgust. Gian was certainly not the man. He was typical of the youth of India, vacillating, always seeking new anchors, new directions, devoid of any basic convictions. He had been dedicated, so he had told them, to truth and non-violence. He had already jettisoned non-violence; how far would he go with truth? (155)

G.S. Amur perceives this turn in Gian's allegiance as a strategy on the part of the novelist when he says: "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).

Sometimes, it is claimed that *A Bend in the Ganges* demonstrates that Gandhian philosophy of non-violence as a political doctrine to oust the Empire was a failure in practical life. Malgonkar too seems to question its validity. Here it may be said that perhaps the author does not want to present non-violence as a practical way of life. In fact, Malgonkar uses many characters to highlight the violence-non violence dichotomy. While Debi-dayal and Shafi openly rejected non-violence as "the philosophy of the sheep", characters like Basu think that Gandhi's message of non-violence has lost its deeper significance and that as an ideology, it is ineffective in practical situations. He 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". (290)

Here, it is pertinent to mention that Debi towards the end of the novel exhibits considerable inclination towards non-violence as is clear from his discussion with Basu. Though this inclination is not shown in clear terms and he still is in doubt about its practicality, he has certainly got disillusioned by the wide-spread violence. As an eye-witness to the holocaust, Debi ponders in the aftermath of communal riots in Punjab: "How had they come to this? 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? (355) Suresh Kumar, a critic, opines 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) G.S. Amur too, accuses Malgonkar for ignoring the non violence of the strong which demands a greater heroism than violence itself. (Amur, 109)

These critics, it seems, are misled by the on-going debate between the contrary ideologies that so characterizes the novel. No doubt, the characters of Shafi and Debi-dayal and other practitioners of violence have been presented with much logic and interest but that forms only a part of the novelist’s strategy. It by no means suggests that the novelist supports violence. There are many critics who outrightly reject such a seemingly anti-Gandhi stand of Manohar Malgonkar. They firmly believe that the novelist is not against Gandhian creed of non-violence. N.S. Pradhan is of the view that to consider *A Bend in the Ganges* as a ‘thesis’ of the utter irrelevance of the Gandhian creed of non-violence in real life, is to unjustly discredit the novel of its real merit and deviate the reader from its depth. (Pradhan, 149) M. Rajagopalachari also believes that the novelist does not favour violence in any way. Rather, he discards it altogether: “Mahohar Malgonkar, does not, however, uphold violence as a way of life. In the death of Debi-dayal, Malgonkar discards violence by revealing its self-consuming nature”. (Rajagopalachari, 58)

Thus, it is clear that Malgonkar does not uphold violence as a way of life. On the other hand, the novel demonstrates that violence is self-consuming and self-destructive. Many critics believe that non-violence as an ideology is not more idealistic than being practical. 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, rejects the philosophy of non-violence. To Ambuj Kumar Sharma, the novel “...is not the refutation of Mahatma’s ideology of non-violence”. (Sharma, 68) Though Mahohar Malgonkar is not blind to the limitations of non-violence as a doctrine and seeks to expose them, he does not discard it. If the doctrine fails, it is the failure of the people who cannot handle it properly. Malgonkar’s treatment of Gandhi’s non-violence can be summarized in the words of Madge Micheels – Cynes: “Nonviolence doesn’t always work—but violence never does”. (Micheel Cynes, 6)

Further by posing the debate over the non-violence of the brave and non-violence of the weak, the writer seeks to prove that non-violence as an idea demands greater courage and strength of character. It should not be seen as a mere impractical ideology. Actually, Manohar Malgonkar gives due credence to non-violence of the brave. The character of Gian is instrumental in demonstrating various facets of non-violence. There are times when Gian definitely reveals characteristics of the non-violence of the weak. He is not only timid but mean also. He is perhaps at his moral ebb when he slits open Ghasita’s ‘khobri’ for the gold coins. He tells blatant lies to Sundari and Tekchand to serve his own petty interests. However, the same character travels back to the strife-torn Duriabad at a time when the Hindus are travelling in the opposite direction. He bravely withstands Sundari’s jeers and is determined to be with the family. When Sundari insults him and asks him to go away, he maintains his calm:

Since we are talking about my degradation, may I tell you that that is partly the reason why I have come? Gian said. ‘*To try and prove, if only to myself, that there can be some good in the weakest of human beings...*’ (emphasis mine)(351-52)

Thus, Gian represents an ordinary person, a common man who may have some weaknesses but the inherent goodness in him always prompts him to overcome those weaknesses. His courage and determinism help the Kerwad family survive the attack from

hooligans led by Shafi and he guides Sundari to a world of safety and, possibly, love. In this way, he stands firmly for the Gandhian values of truth and love. He may not be a practitioner of non-violence of the brave, he is certainly above those who practice non-violence to hide their cowardice. He proves that he is not a coward. From a weak character, he emerges as a strong, brave character towards the end. By showing Gian's regeneration and the killings of Debi-dayal and Shafi Usman, Malgonkar clearly favours the Gandhian ideals. The pure practitioners of violence fall prey to the self-consuming nature of violence. He proves the practicality of truth and non-violence. Undoubtedly, the ideology of non-violence wins.

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