“Accepting—but not accepted; that was the story of his life, the one thread that ran through it all. In Germany he had been dark—his darkness had marked him the Jew, der Jude. In India he was fair—and that marked him the firanghi [foreigner]. In both lands, the unacceptable” (20). Having come to India from Berlin in his late teens, fifty years later Hugo Baumgartner is still “acutely aware of his outlandishness” (20). Not only was he persecuted in Germany as a Jew; in India he is shunned as a foreigner, and also, ironically, cast not just as a German but often assumed to be a Nazi. He has to explain that he is a Jew.

Baumgartner’s gloomy assessment of his situation is an accurate reflection of the historical position. Only about 1,000 escapees found refuge in India where they were definitely undesirables. The reasons for the poor reception they were given, apart from the innate suspicion of strangers, were connected to internal Indian politics. Besides being anti-Zionist the Congress Party feared that the arrival of even a small number of refugees would provoke the Muslim population. As Laqueur points out, “there was little logic in Indian attitudes” for those who came to India were not Zionists; he concludes that “whatever the reason, Jewish refugees were not wanted.”1 The suspicion of them as Germans is more understandable since India was then part of the British Empire at war with Germany. So, as Baumgartner’s Bombay shows, the escapees were interned alongside German nationals who were in fact Nazis. The novel’s fictive plot has an authentic historical backdrop in its portrayal of the rise of Nazism in Germany, the internal tensions, religious as well as political, attendant on the partition of India and Pakistan, and India’s struggle to emerge as an independent nation. Desai, who was born in 1937 to an Indian father and a German mother, would have personal knowledge of recent Indian history.

Although Baumgartner’s statement is made in the novel’s opening chapter it is a retrospective evaluation on the basis of his lifetime’s stay in India. For Baumgartner’s Bombay is circular in shape. Its first chapter begins, as it were, after its last one, after Baumgartner has been murdered by a young German
drug addict to whom he had given shelter. The circle is completed as Lotte, his German friend, contemplates in the closing paragraph the cards Baumgartner’s mother had sent him between 1939 and 1941, a packet she had come upon in his room in the initial paragraph. The novel’s design is ingenious, introducing readers to the exotic location at the outset, and building suspense by its foreshadowing of the plot in references to “stealing” and “murdering” (16) by young hippies. Further time shifts between the present and the past occur as Baumgartner’s history is unfolded. Following the dramatic start on the post-murder scene the second chapter harks back abruptly to Baumgartner’s origins in Berlin in the 1930s. The third shows his arrival in India, while the fourth centers on the war years and his internment. The fifth chapter reverts to the more immediate past as Baumgartner meets the boy and takes him home. The sixth, another return to a further past, fills in the gap between the end of the war and Baumgartner’s current life, including his move to Bombay, his friendship with Lotte, and his adoption of the umpteen stray cats that swarm about his room. The enactment of the murder forms the final chapter.

The novel’s overall pattern is reminiscent of the picaresque in the successive challenges that Baumgartner faces, though with one fundamental difference. He does not seek out adventures, either dragons to slay or windmills to tilt at. On the contrary he tends to passivity (“accepting”), merely trying to cope with what happens to him through the vicissitudes of historical events. His typical reaction, illustrated as he is on his way to India by boat from Venice, is “a lurch of fear,” but as on later occasions he finds that “he had to accept it” (57–8). The nature of the “it” in question varies: expulsion from school, loss of home, emigration to India, internment, rejections, insults, and indignities in the pursuit of a means to support himself. In every instance Baumgartner has little or no choice; he is driven by necessity to an enforced acceptance of what befalls him.

If acceptance becomes a habit for Baumgartner not being accepted is far harder for him to take. His first experience of his differentness comes at school in Berlin at the Christmas celebration when his parents have not sent a gift for him because they did not know that they should. The teacher benignly tries to save the situation by handing him the glass globe off the top of the tree, but he won’t take it as he knows it doesn’t belong to him. He collapse[s] into the dark ditch of his shame. What was the shame? The sense that he did not belong to the picture-book world of the fir tree, the gifts and the celebration? But no one had said that. Was it just that he sensed he did not belong to the radiant, the triumphant of the world? (36)

This incident prefigures his entire future life. In Germany during the rest of his time there under the Nazi regime, as a Jew he certainly cannot belong among the Aryans’ uniformed parades and other more nefarious activities.

Nor does he ever feel a belonging in India. He had at first thought of his emigration as a temporary measure; in the course of the war he comes to