For my parents Chitra Ramanujan and Ranga Ramanujan, and Gidnu
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would not have completed this project without the unfailing support and generosity of my director, Malini J. Schueller. Her intellectual rigor, professionalism, patience and compassion have kept me motivated and on track and taught me important life lessons. I have gained immeasurably from her faith in my abilities as a scholar, and her steady personal and professional guidance. I owe much to Pamela Gilbert for her sustained enthusiasm for my project, optimistic spirit, incredible promptness in responding to every e-mail and paper I ever sent her, and for her sheer brilliance as a teacher. In addition to bringing a South Asianist historian’s critical eye to my work, Swapna Banerjee been a friend and mentor. I have benefited greatly from her extensive editorial skills and tireless revision of my early attempts at grant writing. Leah Rosenberg’s meticulous commentary on my drafts, her always precise and perceptive questions, and overall empathy have been crucial in shaping this dissertation. Mark Thurner’s persistent conceptual and methodological critique of my project has, I hope, helped me become a more scrupulous and self-reflexive writer.

To my teachers at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Meenakshi Mukherjee, GJV Prasad and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, whose commitment to students and to a socially engaged pedagogy were instrumental in molding my subjectivity as a researcher and teacher, I owe respect and appreciation.

For financial support that facilitated this project, I am indebted to the University of Florida for the Alumni Fellowship and the Ruth McQuown award, and the Taraknath Das Foundation for a timely grant. I thank the American Association of University Women for their generous International Fellowship. And, I am grateful to the governing body of Janki Devi Memorial College, University of Delhi, for giving me leave to pursue a doctoral degree in Florida.
Special thanks go to Kathy Williams of the English department for painstakingly processing all my paperwork, to Pat Bartlett for her detailed editorial comments, to Ken Booth and his ever helpful team in the ETD lab, and to Maud Fraser and Amisha Sharma at the UF International Center.

This has been a difficult year, fraught with unforeseen problems and setbacks that I could not have survived but for the solidarity of friends, in the United States and India. I especially thank Bharati Kasibhatla, with whom I have had the longest conversations and downed the most caffeine on midnight ‘breaks’ from term paper and dissertation writing, for her thoughtfulness, humor, and for her unwavering emotional and practical support through the long years of this PhD. I thank Madhura Bandyopadhyaya, Kanika Batra, Renuka Bisht, Sharmain Van Blommestein, Sangeeta Mediratta, Mansi Parekh and Adnan Sabuwala, my community of fellow graduate students in Gainesville and elsewhere, for assistance on countless occasions; and Sarah Cervone, Rebecca Dettorre, Robin Dinning, Karmen Wall and Ann Welch for their warmth and for introducing me to their furry companions. In my professional world in Delhi, I owe a debt of gratitude to Vani Subbanna and Jitender Gill for advice and support on my messy ‘leave situation’ and Swati Pal and Rita Sinha for their concern and for sticking their necks out for me.

I lack the words to adequately express my deep affection and gratitude for my parents. Their extraordinary love, strength, inspiration, and immense personal sacrifices ensured that my academic pursuits were not disrupted at any stage. The PhD may be a milestone in my professional life but it means significantly more to them. This dissertation is, therefore, jointly dedicated to my mother and father and to Gidnu, the orange and white tabby who keeps them sane.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ......................................................................................................................... 4

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................................................... 8

CHAPTER

1  INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................................................... 10

2  POLITICAL FICTIONS: THE ‘EMERGENCY’ REVISITED........................................................... 32
    Introduction..................................................................................................................................... 32
    A Fine Balance: Coalition Politics and the Rhetoric of Development ........................................... 38
    The Making of ‘Mother India’ ........................................................................................................ 41
    *Sampoorna Kranti*: The Doctrine of ‘Total Revolution’ ............................................................ 47
    Literary Imaginings: O.V. Vijayan and Rohinton Mistry ............................................................ 52
    Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................... 69

3  NEGOTIATING COMMUNALIZED SPACES: PERFORMING TRADITIONS ......................... 71
    Introduction..................................................................................................................................... 71
    Is there a Secular Muslim in India? ............................................................................................... 73
    Gender and Community ................................................................................................................. 79
    Theorizing the ‘Past’ ...................................................................................................................... 82
    Basava and the *Virashaiva* Movement ....................................................................................... 85
    Tale Danda and Mahachaitra: A Reading ..................................................................................... 87
    Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................... 98

4  CASTE IN A SECULAR IMAGINARY: REPRESENTATION AND THE POLITICS OF DALIT IDENTITY ................................................................. 101
    Introduction..................................................................................................................................... 101
    Representing the Nation’s Disenfranchised: Mahasweta, Puran Sahay and Pirtha ....................... 110
    A Movement in Search of Direction: Routes and Escape Routes .................................................. 118
    The Subaltern, the Text and the Critic: Reading Phoolan Devi ...................................................... 133
    Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................... 143

5  SECULARIZING FEMINISM(S): SEXUALITY, PERFORMANCE, AND WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS IN INDIA ............................................................ 144
    Introduction..................................................................................................................................... 144
    *Sachetana*: Feminist Mobilization through Theater ................................................................. 148
    “Making Heroes and Heroines of Assassins and Lesbians” ....................................................... 160
    CALERI: Toward an Intersectionality Critique .......................................................................... 166
    Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................... 178
6 CONCLUSION................................................................................................................... 181
LIST OF REFERENCES........................................................................................................... 187
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH ....................................................................................................... 197
This dissertation examines the contested literary and cultural domains surrounding the meanings of secularism as a political doctrine, and the secular as a cultural ethic and practice in contemporary India. Drawing upon and extending a substantial and richly textured body of multidisciplinary scholarship that emerged as a response to the disturbing Hindu nationalist upsurge in Indian political and cultural life in the final decades of the twentieth century, I identify, in the gender-, caste- and class-based struggles of those on the margins of the nation, useful resources for rethinking secularism. Furthermore, I show how critically reconfiguring the secular as a means of social justice for the marginalized offers possibilities for refashioning, through heterogeneous and fluid imaginings, dominant discourses of the national and of the nation-as-home. Interpolating Rustom Bharucha’s notion of a secular public sphere engaged in ceaseless inscriptions of “new diversities” that include and exceed religion; Akeel Bilgrami’s formulation of an “emergent” or “substantive” secularism; the minoritarian impetus underlying the Saidian concept of “secular criticism,” as well as recent writings on citizenship, gender, sexuality, and caste in my study, I strive to chart multiple sites and definitions of the secular in literatures and cultural representations of social subordination. My effort to re-envision the secular as shot through with the viewpoint and subjectivity of ‘minority,’ a concept I also subject
to scrutiny, focuses primarily on fiction, personal testimonies, and theater involving Dalits (oppressed castes), religious and sexual minorities.

Spanning the last quarter of the twentieth century, the range of texts discussed here are critical responses to formative social and political ‘events’ in the checkered postcolonial history of the nation. My selection and analysis of narratives by O.V. Vijayan, Rohinton Mistry, Imayam, Mahasweta Devi, Vijay Dan Detha, Girish Karnad, H.S. Shiva Prakash, Mahesh Dattani, Phoolan Devi, Datta Bhagat, Malini Bhattacharya, and activist coalitions like SAHMAT and CALERI that, through their portrayal of marginalized collectivities, imagine secular publics undergirded by diverse and shifting conceptions of identity, justice, and (co-)existence, is undeniably shaped by a recognition of the performative and utopian dimensions of all cultural texts.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

As I ponder the elusive, yet inevitable, question of endings and beginnings in preparation to evince a rationale and framework for my inquiry into the secular, the phone rings in my apartment in Delhi. It is the spring of 2006, and the caller is a friend from the dharna [sit-in] site of the Narmada Bachao Andolan [‘Save the Narmada’ Movement] in the heart of the city. Its leader Medha Patkar has finally broken her twenty-one day hunger strike. She was accompanied by two villagers, tribals whose homes and lives will be submerged by the rising waters and who have been evicted from the Narmada Valley. Subsequently, some students, a university professor and activists joined them in an expression of solidarity. The indefinite fast began in protest against the Indian state’s refusal to heed the organization’s repeated demands for rehabilitation of the thirty-five thousand more families, mostly tribal and Dalit, who face displacement by a new proposal to increase the height of the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River.\(^1\) Patkar now plans to return to the Valley to unmask the hollowness of claims made by three state governments about the status of their rehabilitation efforts.\(^2\)

As in the past two decades of the NBA’s existence, public opinion is divided between self-styled liberals who slam the movement for being retrograde and anti-development and those who maintain that development, though necessary, must proceed with caution about its potential and actual costs to people and the environment. A section of the ruling party in Gujarat, whose infamous Chief Minister Narendra Modi masterminded the genocide against Muslims in the state in 2002, have vandalized the NBA office. Patkar is continually accused of being anti-national for

\(^1\) The term “Dalit” literally means ‘downtrodden’ or ‘broken people’ and designates those traditionally excluded from or at the very bottom of the Hindu caste hierarchy. For a more extensive gloss, see Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

\(^2\) For a detailed study of various dimensions of the Narmada issue, including the costs – human, ecological, and financial – of big dams, see Arundhati Roy, especially her article “The Greater Common Good.”
denying precious water to the citizens and industries of three states. Realpolitik assumes parodic heights when Modi, in response to the Gandhian mode of non-violent resistance adopted by Patkar, announces his own decision to go on a fifty-one hour hunger strike in defense of development, the dam, and the farmers and industrialists of his state. In a few weeks, he will be called upon to control an outbreak of communal violence triggered by the demolition, by the Municipal Corporation of the city of Vadodara, of a two-hundred year old dargah.3 The shrine, believed by locals, to have been the grave-site of the Sufi saint Rasheeduddin Chishti who preached religious syncretism and tolerance, was nevertheless associated with Muslim religious sentiment. It is reported to have been the site of repeated instances of communal strife from 1969 onwards. Following its destruction, as now amid the Narmada crisis, Modi will vindicate the state’s position as embodying the secular [read modern and progressive] interests of urban planning and accuse the media and activists, protesting police failure to provide protection to vulnerable groups, of deliberately communalizing the issue.

Meanwhile, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi is bulldozing slum colonies and ‘unauthorized’ constructions in different parts of the city, instantly displacing thousands of migrant workers and their families. A massive metro rail project, one of many such ‘modernizing’ schemes that promise to transform the urban landscape, must be completed in time for the Commonwealth Games to be hosted by the city in 2010. Spokesperson for the NBA Arundhati Roy, in her statements to the press, constantly draws correlations between the

---

3 Even though the terms are related, I do not intend to imply either that ‘community’ and ‘communal’ identities are synonymous or that the former necessarily or invariably mutates into the latter. By ‘community,’ I mean any and all forms of group identity. These are not, by definition, coercive or antithetical to the fostering of multiple solidarities (of caste, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, etc.) among and between members. ‘Communal’ in the context of South Asia, on the other hand, denotes an understanding of ‘community’ in monolithic, religious and/or ethnic terms. ‘Communal’ formations, therefore, uphold religion as the sole basis of identity and of group interest. The creation and consolidation of ‘communal’ identities necessitates the positing of a demonized ‘other’ (also defined in discrete, religious terms) as a source of perpetual conflict and antagonism.
dispossessed agrarian communities of the Narmada and the alleged squatters and polluters of our cities who must be made to disappear so that the new metropolis may be reclaimed and globalized for its proper citizens. “It will not be a Narmada bachao andolan but desh bachao [save the country],” says Patkar as she prepares to leave the city, adding, “we want a secular development agenda based on the values of equity, justice and sustainability which should cut across party lines and political divisions between parties and even within parties” (Parsai 1, emphasis mine).

The proper citizens of Delhi, or at least a large proportion of college and university students among them, are in the midst of annual examinations and cannot be expected to take to the streets. Or, so we presume when a colleague and I make excuses for their continued absence from the NBA dharna. However, about the same time, newspapers carry extensive coverage of an anti-reservation rally that has been organized in the city to protest against the government’s proposal to increase the reservation quota for ‘backward’ castes (OBCs) in institutions of higher education. Their schedules notwithstanding, Delhi University students are reported as having participated in large numbers at the march. Their placards and slogans exclaim that political expediency has compromised merit, secularism, and progress yet again. Mid-term polls are imminent and the Congress-led coalition at the Center cannot afford to alienate its allies on the Left and in OBC-majority parties. As responsible citizens, the burden of restoring democratic values falls to these young men and women. Their sentiments are echoed by large sections of the

---

4 I refer specifically to students of the University of Delhi. Students of Jawaharlal Nehru University and Jamia Millia Islamia were present in sizeable numbers through the duration of the sit-in.

5 The recent bill to increase the quota for OBCs from twenty-seven percent to forty-nine percent in all central government institutions has been referred to by its opponents as Mandal II. The recommendations of the Mandal Commission Report, extending reservations to OBCs in education and state employment, were first implemented amid much controversy in 1990 and led to the fall of the V.P. Singh government. Then, as now, students of Delhi University were at the forefront of protests against what they claimed were caste-based ‘concessions,’ prompted by vote bank politics, granted to those who lacked ‘merit’ and which would eventually undermine both secularism and democracy. For more details, see Chapter 4 of this dissertation.
mainstream media, several prominent academics and heads of educational institutions, and corporate India.

Although increasingly routine and familiar in its recurrence, this brief account of civic contestations of state policy, itself a product of manifold and shifting compulsions, and of the diversity of opinion generated therein is significant, to my project, for two reasons. Firstly it registers the continuing dominance in India, of the postcolonial state, which exists in a relation of both fierce contest and complicity with society. Despite the state’s abysmal record in providing welfare and protection to all its citizens, it still remains the terrain on which access to democracy, an idea subjected to detailed examination in the next chapter, is negotiated. Secondly, and more importantly, the narrative communicates the semantic instability of the term secularism in public discourse in India. This indeterminacy, in evidence since the mid nineteen-eighties, contributes to its wide currency and proliferation across a spectrum of sometimes conflicting socio-cultural and political viewpoints, interests and arrangements. These differences, in turn, invoke and inscribe an unruly universe characterized by a continual and frequently tense dialectic between two sets of concepts. They comprise the ostensibly contractual and universalizing gesselschaft ideals of modernity which include the Nehruvian twin pillars of democracy and development and so-called gemeinschaft attachments and identities, equally modern, political and in flux, based on caste or religious community.\(^6\) Although interdisciplinary in its approach and method, my dissertation deploys literature and theater as the primary discursive lenses for the exploration of tensions and conflicts through which this domain is endlessly reconstituted.

\(^6\) I derive these terms from Sudipta Kaviraj’s critical reading of Toennies. Kaviraj’s undoing of the binary logic inherent in Toennies’ use of the terms makes them particularly useful for understanding the complex constitution and interplay between concepts, communities, and identities in postcolonial societies. See especially, Kaviraj’s articles, “The Imaginary Institution of India,” and “In Search of Civil Society.”
This project critically engages in the vast and multi-layered province of scholarship surrounding the meanings of secularism as a political doctrine, and the secular as a cultural ethic and practice, in contemporary India. Much of this work, produced from across a range of disciplines and theoretical and interpretive positions, emerged as a response to the disturbing Hindu nationalist upsurge in Indian political and cultural life in the final decades of the twentieth century. Likewise, my critical investment in these debates and search for productive ways to re-site the secular as a positive and viable force within the national imaginary, began in response to the embattled ground circumscribing the concept amid aggressive Hindu majoritarian efforts to reconfigure India in monolithic and exclusivist terms. However, it rapidly became evident that the crisis of the last quarter century could not be adequately understood without opening up the very idea of the secular nation forged in the early decades after independence to critical reassessment.

In the course of my research and for reasons that I shall presently outline, my current position, the outcome of sustained and extensive engagement with various aspects of the issue, is predicated on a bilateral approach. On the one hand, I contend that secularism cannot be entirely disengaged from deliberation on the role of religion in public life. Additionally, my analysis of emergent models of secular subjectivity, community and citizenship, in the texts I examine, derives from an engagement with the political and cultural coordinates of nationalism. On the other hand, as dramaturge and activist Rustom Bharucha points out, secularism must constantly renew itself by expanding its scope beyond religion to include other categories of difference like caste, class, gender and sexuality. I extend his suggestion to propose that gender-, caste- and class-based struggles of the nation’s oppressed could provide useful resources for revitalizing secularism. Furthermore, I show how reconfiguring secularism as a means of social justice for
the marginalized offers possibilities for refashioning, through heterogeneous and fluid imaginings, dominant discourses of the national and of belonging to the nation-as-home. Interpolating Akeel Bilgrami’s notion of secularism as “negotiated” rather than assumed; the minoritarian impetus underlying the Saidian concept of “secular criticism;” as well as recent writings on gender, sexuality and caste in my study; I strive to map multiple sites and definitions of the secular in literatures and cultural representations of social subordination. My effort to re-envision the secular as shot through with the critical perspective of ‘minority,’ focuses primarily on fiction and performance involving Dalits, religious and sexual minorities.

In the course of further explicating the nature and scope of my critical inquiries, I shall selectively trace the domain and evolution of the concept in postcolonial India. In so doing, I will contextualize and signpost the major positions, including points of conflict and convergence, which have informed and animated intellectual discussion of the crisis of secularism from the mid-eighties onwards, provide a critique of some of these arguments, and strive to illustrate their specific relevance for my study.

Historically, the concept of political secularism evolved in India in the aftermath of Partition as a response to interreligious conflict, both real and anticipated. It thus followed what Rajeev Bhargava has recently called the “religious strife model” whose primary goal was the protection of minorities against the absolutist impulses of mass democracy, defined simply as the rule of the numerical majority.7 Despite their widely divergent views on the personal and public role of religion, both Gandhi and Nehru recognized the dangers to plurality and freedom extant in the program of the Hindu nationalists. Thus, while Gandhi’s vision for India centered on the regenerative force of religion nurtured by a political and cultural philosophy of ‘equal respect

---

7 Its merits notwithstanding, the majoritarian patronage underlying this notion of ‘protectionism’ cannot be ignored. I discuss this issue in greater detail in relation to the ‘problem’ of Muslim identity in India in Chapter 3.
and treatment’ (sarva dharma sambhava), Nehru’s training in western, liberal thought and fears about a politics inflected by religious considerations led to his conception of ‘neutrality’ or ‘impartiality’ as the relational principle between religion and the state (dharmanirpekshata). For Nehru, privatizing religious faith (as well as caste and language) and authorizing state intervention in religious affairs only to ensure universal rights of citizenship, were essential to undermining the threats posed by communalism. The bracketing off and displacement of these markers of cultural and ethnic identity and filiation from the public domain, he hoped, would eventually facilitate the consolidation of Indianness in the language of Enlightenment modernity. In other words, as some critics have pointed out, Nehru himself did not espouse a formulated theory of secularism (Khilnani 176). Nor did he consider it necessary to evolve a negotiated understanding of the construct through creative dialogue with believers and/or religious communities. The term itself was introduced into the Constitution during the authoritarian Emergency regime of Indira Gandhi in the mid-seventies. Ironically, by this time the Nehruvian vision had completely unraveled and revealed itself, in the process of its demise, to be conceptually flawed and, owing to its elite and “Archimedean” character, implicitly preserving the values and privileges of the majority, i.e., upper caste, Hindu India (Bilgrami 395; and Nigam 68-76).

The debates about the triadic relation of communalism-secularism-nationalism instigated by the identification of a crisis since the mid-eighties, it seems to me, can be divided into two very broad positions. At one end of the spectrum are anti-modernist, communitarian theorists who argue that communalism and nationalism are part of the same discourse and emerged in opposition to colonialism. Both, they emphasize, derive their energies from modern statecraft and are homogenizing and essentially repressive in their effects. Both strive for political and
cultural hegemony through selective appropriation of ethnic categories in service to an imagined community. However, anti-secular theorists like T.N. Madan and Ashis Nandy go a step further to claim that secular nationalism, a product of Enlightenment modernity, in relegating religion to the private sphere, actually produces communalism as its backlash. Modern secularism, as practiced by the state, treats religion as “ideology” leaving no space for a conceptualization of “faith” or of lived traditions in which popular religiososity is located. Nandy writes: “Much of the fanaticism and violence associated with religion comes today from a sense of defeat of the believers, from their feelings of impotency, and from their free-floating anger and self-hatred while facing a world that is increasingly secular and desacralized” (“Politics” 332).

Nandy’s critique of the failure of secular ideologies to comprehend the status and influence of religion in public life is an important one. And, he is alert to the fact that certain hegemonic forms of secularism are underpinned by an uncritical allegiance to progress and modernity whose achievement frequently legitimates the use of domination and violence. In the process, secularism as a state ideology assumes apocalyptic proportions capable of surpassing even the coercive tendencies commonly associated with religiously inflected ideologies:

The role of … secular ideology in many societies today is no different from the crusading and inquisitional role of religious ideologies, and in such societies, the citizens are often less protected against the ideology of the state than against religious ideologies or theocratic forces. Certainly in India, the ideas of nation-building, scientific growth, security, modernization, and development have become parts of a left-handed, quasi-religious practice – a new demonology, a tantra with a built-in code of violence. (333)

The stranglehold of official secularism, Nandy avers, can only be broken through a “continuous dialogue among religious traditions and between the religious and the secular.” He identifies this “more accommodative meaning” as “non-Western,” grounded in the Gandhian concept of ‘equal respect,’ and compatible with the ethic of tolerance already inscribed in the non-modern, everyday practices and traditions of India (327). Inherent in this communitarian
ethos of lived faiths, outside the gamut of modernity, according to Nandy, are the tools for resuscitating Indian political culture (337). In thus treating communities as primordial and monolithic cultural units rather than as complex and shifting entities produced as much by colonial and postcolonial modernity as is the state, Nandy betrays an indigenist, dichotomous logic that is as homogenizing as the statism he so vehemently attacks. Moreover, in holding secularism culpable for the upsurge of communalism and in valorizing the inherently plural, fluid and tolerant “faith” of pre-modern communities (as opposed to the “secular and desacralized” world of modernity) apparently uninterrupted by internal differences of class, caste and gender, he risks legitimating coercive, communal formations that claim, for themselves, the exclusive right to speak on behalf of all members of a group.

Successful Hindu majoritarian deployment of state resources to systematically target minority (religious or ethnic) communities perceived as deviating from its version of ‘national culture’ and homogenized citizenship while simultaneously preserving its own credentials as a modern, secular institution, impels Partha Chatterjee’s influential critique of secularism. This compatibility with the apparatuses of the modern state, he argues, allows the Hindu Right to avert charges of being anti-secular; erase difference and promote intolerance and violence against minorities in the name of secularization; and designate as anti- or pseudo- secular any attempts to defend minority rights/difference. However, unlike Nandy whose assessment of statecraft culminates in an in toto rejection of modernity as an analytical measure of contemporary India and attempts to recuperate tolerance embodied in the so-called traditional spaces of the non-modern, Chatterjee’s analysis, it seems to me, proceeds from an awareness that an absolute outside no longer exists. He therefore professes interest in “looking for political possibilities within the domain of the modern state institutions as they now exist in India”
(“Secularism and Tolerance” 348, footnote 2). He clarifies, however, that this critical undertaking involves arguing not “from the position of the state” or those who act on its behalf to grant rights to minorities. Rather, his concern is with locating conditions for a “strategic politics… in which a minority group, or one who is prepared to think from the position of a minority group, can engage in India today” (373).

The “unitary rationalism of the language of rights” inscribed in the universal forms of the liberal democratic state, Chatterjee argues, is ill equipped for addressing cultural diversity in the postcolonial world (370). His critique of secularism is, therefore, predicated on a commitment to exploring possibilities for tolerance of cultural difference outside the limited framework afforded by the “concepts of sovereignty and right” (370). In tracing his decade-long preoccupation with finding a defensible claim and appropriate institutions for safeguarding minority rights while simultaneously facilitating change within minority communities in the interests of a secular polity, I find a curious pattern of evolution. In his seminal 1994 article cited above, Chatterjee turns to Foucault’s notion of governmentality as a specific form of modern power that cuts across the liberal separation of state and civil society and allows for an “immensely flexible braiding of coercion and consent” (370). The cultural community, rather than the state, becomes the site for the collective articulation of a “strategic politics of toleration” which involves a “right against governmentality, that is a right not to offer reasons for being different” (373). In other words, the minority community uses its own right of “sovereignty” “against governmentality” (372).

However, Chatterjee qualifies that a minority group enjoys this right of sovereignty as long as “it explains itself adequately in its own chosen forum” (375). In this scheme, the intracommunity site becomes the exclusive locus of democracy as each member of the group,
engaged in a two-way contestation, resists the homogenizing impulses of universal citizenship from the outside while, at the same time, pushing for democratization of the community inside:

… our protagonist will try to engage in a strategic politics that is neither integrationist nor separatist. She will in fact locate herself precisely at the cusp where she can face, on the one side, the assimilationist powers of governmental technology and resist, on the grounds of autonomy and self-representation, for the emergence of more representative public institutions and practices within her community. (376)

Chatterjee’s plea for democratization through internal reform within communities is quite clearly a response to Hindu majoritarian efforts to recast the debate surrounding the implementation of a Uniform Civil Code, an exercise in secularization, to persecute a particular minority religious community for its ostensible refusal to re-examine its gender discriminatory religious/personal laws. However, his assumption of the religious community as the only viable site of resistance against the repressive forces of modern statecraft even as it allows for a negotiated understanding of individual and collective rights and freedoms within, has elicited much criticism, most notably from feminists. They argue that Chatterjee’s positing of the religious community as fixed and inherently homogeneous fails to recognize that women usually exist in a relationship of subordination and control to the patriarchal norms that define such communities. The continued preservation of their autonomy and freedoms in the name of cultural diversity, therefore, can only serve to shore up coercive and illiberal structures and further deprive women of their rights.

The feminist critique of Chatterjee’s idealization of community directs attention to power differentials at the intracommunity level that militate against the achievement of toleration.

---

8 Issues relating to marriage and family are still governed by the personal laws of religious communities. For decades, women’s groups have campaigned for the abolition of personal laws and greater gender justice through the implementation of a Uniform Civil Code. For further details on the communalization of the UCC debate by the Hindu Right in the mid-eighties, see Chapter 5 of this dissertation.

9 See, for example, Kumkum Sangari, “Politics of Diversity: Religious Communities and Multiple Patriarchies” and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan. The Scandal of the State: Women, Law, and Citizenship in Postcolonial India.
However, what is also unclear in Chatterjee’s argument is how intercommunity dialogue aimed at preserving cultural difference while guaranteeing toleration may be achieved. In other words, in order that deliberation be initiated with the purpose of finding common ground, a level playing field and mutually acceptable benchmarks must be ensured. If every citizen is simultaneously a spokesperson for his/her religious community, within and without, how may the unequal power relations between communities be resolved so that negotiation with a view to achieving some consensus may be envisaged?10

In his more recent work on the subject of who best represents minorities, Chatterjee acknowledges the impracticability of his exclusive narrative of community (Politics 127) even as he retains his skepticism about the legal and administrative apparatuses of the Indian state. However, a third site of mass participation and reform at the cusp of government and community that he calls political society is proffered as an emergent zone with the potential to democratize the question of minority representation (128). I read this shift in Chatterjee’s perspective as a tentative acknowledgment of the inevitability of resorting, however deconstructively and with a view to transforming their founding assumptions, to the liberal discourse of rights in everyday negotiations of socio-political space in our times. From refusing to give reasons for their difference and risking consignment to a zone of unreason, Chatterjee now proposes that minorities re-enter, to negotiate anew, their rights in the political realm.

Elsewhere in his work, Chatterjee describes “political society” as a terrain of popular sovereignty lying between the state and civil society and characterized by the paralegal practices

---

10 I do not intend to enter into Akeel Bilgrami’s notion of “substantive” or “emergent” secularism here. I allude to his work only in order to differentiate it from Chatterjee’s. Nehruvian secularism, according to Bilgrami, was “Archimedean” in that it was imposed from above and did not emerge through an “internal dialectic between communities.” Instead, he proposes a “emergent secularism” that evolves as the result of negotiation between the substantive commitments of different religious communities on a statist site. Unlike Chatterjee who emphasizes community autonomy, Bilgrami argues forcefully for a secularism that can be fostered through internal community reform overseen by a liberal, secular state.
and claims of the disenfranchised or non-citizens (“Beyond” 30-34). Consisting of political parties and movements as well as non-governmental formations and alliances, this sphere sees constant attempts to “device new, and often contextual and transitory, norms of fairness and justice in making available the welfare and developmental functions of government to large sections of poor and underprivileged people” (Politics 128).

Chatterjee’s theorization of “political society” signals an expansion of democratic participation whereby governmentality is successfully redeployed by underprivileged population groups to negotiate their demands with the state. This task, he notes, is frequently accomplished by a careful framing of claims in terms of a moral community of shared interests or kinship even when no such form of collective identification is readily available (57). To me, this is the most fascinating and useful aspect of Chatterjee’s complex argument. The possibility of forging a purely contextual, provisional, fictive and affiliative community identity, it seems to me, could offer a valuable model for secularism. At the same time, as my readings in Chapters 3 and 4 reveal, such affiliative claims to moral community in the messy, fractious and violent world of political society could just as easily be harnessed toward extremely repressive and undemocratic ends. Chatterjee himself does not address the more sinister aspects of political society, preferring to limit his treatment of its functioning to relatively innocuous examples of everyday struggles over urban land and property. Nevertheless, his observation, as I shall presently outline, provides me with crucial linkages to the work of modernist theorists of secularism like Mufti and Bharucha, who constitute the other end of the triadic relation to which I alluded at the beginning of this section.

In an article on Edward Said’s work, Aamir Mufti makes an interesting distinction between secularism and nationalism (“Auerbach”). He argues, via his reading of Said and Bruce Robbins,
that secularism is necessarily anti-nationalist. In other words, in its mission to inscribe plurality and difference within the nation space, secularism is inherently opposed to the majoritarian, homogenizing and centrifugal impulses of nationalism. While the former stresses the particular, the latter seeks to efface diversity through the twin processes of inclusion and ‘othering.’

Even though I endorse the broad strokes of Mufti’s argument, which I subject to further analysis in Chapter 3, it seems to me to operate within a rigid binary that inhibits a more nuanced understanding of the relationship under consideration. On the one hand, Mufti’s reading, in pitting secularism against nationalism, leaves no space for articulating communitarian positions like those of Ashis Nandy and Partha Chatterjee that are both anti-nationalist and anti-secular. Secondly, as the work of Bharucha, Bhargava and Bilgrami (to name only a few theorists) bears witness, not all secularists are either anti- or post-national.

As a self-avowed modernist, Bharucha sharply distinguishes his position on the secular from both the multiculturalism of the state whose primary goal, he asserts, is to manage differences, particularly those relating to minorities, in service to normative prescriptions of citizenship, and communitarians like Nandy and Chatterjee whose uncompromising critique of the modern state, he fears, results in a somewhat essentialized, inadequately theorized, anti-modernist and culturalist rhetoric of tradition and community. However, revisiting Bharucha’s critique of Chatterjee from 1998 after reading the latter’s most recent writings on “political society” reveals some striking similarities in thought processes. In the earlier work, Bharucha comments that “Chatterjee simply closes any possibility of citizens negotiating the power of the State through new political alliances based on a re-articulation of their communitarian ties” (In the Name 95). As a result, he suggests that the “public sphere,” in Chatterjee, is denied any oppositional potential. Bharucha continues:
Undeniably, these are indeterminate spaces, at once volatile and regimented, open to being secularized or appropriated by communal forces. These are spaces – unformulated, inchoate, processual – that lie between the narratives of capital [the state] and community, illuminating the profoundly fragmented state of citizenship in India today. (95)

I recognize that Chatterjee’s concept of “political society” is predicated on its distinction from the civic initiatives that characterize the “public sphere” from which the bulk of the governed population is excluded. Yet, Bharucha’s allusion to the “fragmented state of citizenship” and, therefore, of the public sphere itself, and his characterizing of this emergent and shifting space of alliances and negotiations between communities and the state resonates, in significant ways, with Chatterjee’s more recent formulation about a chaotic and dissident space of covert operations and arrangements in the interstices of the discourse of citizenship and rights and the filiative and affiliative language of community.11 So, while I have no intention of suggesting that, except for nomenclature, the two concepts are identical, I do think that drawing attention to their mutual correlation opens up space for productive contextual exchange and enrichment.

Marking his quest for a secular public sphere in terms of “an affirmation of the contemporary” (In the Name 6), Bharucha locates potential for secular intervention in the “intraculturalism” of emergent people’s movements shaped by urban struggles for survival in the face of migrancy, communal violence and the uncertainties unleashed by the forces of neo-liberalism. Even though he acknowledges that these incipient cultures are not entirely free from their own sectarianisms, he underscores that they are primarily forged by a will (or necessity) to coexist despite their differences of religion, region, caste, language, ethnicity, etc. And in breaking down monolithic and purely culturalist notions of community identity, they inject

11 I derive the terms filiation and affiliation from Edward Said’s work. Said uses the notions dichotomously to denote biological/communitarian (gemeinschaft) and modern (gesselschaft) ties respectively. I prefer to understand them as a dialectical relation. The World, the Text and the Critic, 16-20.
change into “the very crux of the transition between the narratives of community and citizenship.” (Bharucha, “Cultural Transitions” 49).

Bharucha’s most crucial contribution to the debate and a line of argument I intend to critically develop in subsequent chapters lies, in my view, in his premise that there can be no single agenda for secular commitments in India but rather, multiple, intersecting agendas that variously implicate the discourses of “communalism, multiculturalism and globalization” (Cultural Practice 189). Ultimately, secularism is a “fighting creed for a more democratic form of citizenship” (190) where religion is one aspect in molding identities and negotiating secularism, not its “sole determining criterion” (In the Name 6). I shall return to this point in a moment.

Talal Asad provides further insights into the question in his explorations of the relation between religion and nationalism. Emphasizing the importance of a historically informed as well as a contextually specific analysis, he notes that while we should not accept its Eurocentric mandates without question, ‘secularism’ cannot be understood without reference to the Enlightenment:

To insist that nationalism should be seen as religion, or even as having been shaped by religion is, in my view, to miss the nature and consequence of the revolution brought about by the Enlightenment doctrine of secularism in the structure of modern collective representations and practices. Of course modern nationalism draws on preexisting languages and practices – including those that we call anachronistically, ‘religious.’ How could it be otherwise? Yet it does not follow from this that religion forms nationalism. (Formations 194).

Additionally, Asad rightly cautions against critiques that maintain too rigid a separation between the secular and the religious. Although he does not allude to Nandy’s work, his caveat serves as a useful reminder that it is such dichotomous thinking that leads to the assertion that secularism, understood simply as anti-religion, actually produces extreme forms of religiosity. Even as he deconstructs absolute distinctions between the secular and the religious, Asad nevertheless avers that the concepts are not synonymous or interchangeable. This offers, as I have attempted to
demonstrate in my brief exposition of Bharucha’s work, the possibility of extending the
correlates of secularism beyond its definitions as anti-communalism to include differences that
cut across religion into class, caste, gender and sexuality.

Bharucha’s identification of a secular culture in-the-making in a dispersed and fragmented
public sphere subject to continual reinvention by struggle suggests strong parallels with the work
of another theorist of citizenship and marginalization, the interpolation of whose insights
enables, in my view, an expansion of the critical range of Bharucha’s observations. Nancy
Fraser’s reconceptualization of the Habermasian model toward developing a “postbourgeois”
version of the public sphere is predicated on a critique of the exclusions – of gender, class, race,
and ethnicity -- by which the liberal model is necessarily constituted (Fraser 71). Instead of a
singular, uniform and comprehensive public constituted as “a space of zero-degree culture”
which works to preserve the status quo, Fraser envisages a public sphere composed of a
“multiplicity of competing publics” that challenge universalisms about “public opinion” and the
“common good” by which the bourgeois model is articulated (72-77). Like Bharucha’s emergent
“cultures of struggle,” these “subaltern counterpublics” are contestatory without being either
separatist or assimilationist. While, on the one hand, they serve as “spaces of withdrawal and
regroupment,” on the other, “they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational
activities directed toward wider publics” (Fraser 82). Bharucha’s quest for a secular imaginary
shaped by “interconnected campaigns, agitations and demonstrations” that foster “multiple
visions of coexistence and respect for difference” thus resonates powerfully with Fraser’s
formulations (In the Name 12). Ultimately for Fraser, their emancipatory potential lies in the
ability of these competing publics to combine “social equality, cultural diversity, and
participatory democracy” outcomes which, for Bharucha, are critical to the development of the secular (85).

Another important aspect of Fraser’s critique of liberalism that invokes useful correspondences with Bharucha and Chatterjee is her interrogation of the sharp separation of the state and civil society upon which notions of the bourgeois public sphere are predicated. She maintains that in envisaging a solely associational and opinion-generating role for the public sphere in contrast with the decisionist function accorded to the state, the Habermasian model promotes “weak publics” (Fraser 90). The emergence of parliamentary sovereignty and the resultant dissolution of the separation, she argues, strengthens the democratic process by enabling the translation of “opinion” into “authoritative decisions” (90). Thus “strong publics,” while helping to forge discursive opinion outside the gamut of political arrangements are simultaneously equipped with the power to influence decision-making. However, while publics may frequently overlap in terms of membership and inter-public deliberation and accountability toward developing a “common good” are theoretically conceivable, Fraser admits that actual practice may reveal quite different results. In Chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation, I extend the debate about wider inter-public interactions and accountability in relation to the politics of caste and gender/sexuality within the Indian context.

The performative and utopian dimensions of literature and theater comprise the primary discursive arenas through which I examine how the secular is being reinvented and disseminated within the public sphere in India vis-à-vis changing perceptions of justice, interest and identity of the nation’s marginalized. Although the performative has its antecedents in the formalist traditions of speech-act theory and discourse analysis, and the latter seeks to offer an “enlarged
perspective for any Marxist analysis of culture” (Jameson 291), I do believe that the two positions can be effectively, if critically, combined to offer a comprehensive theory of reading.

Thus, through a series of close textual analyses, I make visible the process of meaning-making in narrative in terms of a productive tension between two set of functions. For, even as it reports on the world and its affairs (constative), literature performs or brings into being the characters and events which it names (performative). Or, to state textual/interpretive function differently, while cultural discourse affirms ideology/the values of its social class, it simultaneously projects a Utopian energy “as the symbolic affirmation of a specific historical and class form of collective unity” (Jameson 291). This dualistic impulse, according to Jameson, is expressive of all cultural texts. And, as Derrida reminds us in his analysis of the performative, every act of writing/reading is an iteration that “animates and alters forms that it repeats” (qtd. in Culler 517). In this sense, the possibility of a new or singular event of reading/writing; of resistance, critical insight and change; relies precisely on a repetition of norms – literary, social and cultural. Thus, acts of reading/writing are, potentially, literary productions, heterogeneous, constitutive events “whose ‘reality’ or duration is never assured, but which by that very fact are more thought-provoking” (ibid.). If, for Derrida (and Butler), the possibility of difference and subversion is inscribed in the inevitable gulf between the normative ideal and its achievement through acts of repetition; for Jameson, the possibility of reading differently, of a “positive hermeneutic” that deciphers “Utopian impulses of these same still ideological texts” (296) is inherent in our very constitution of literary discourse as a “coexistence of different functions” (288-9). And, in projecting collectivities as “figures for the ultimate concrete collective life of an achieved … classless society,” the Utopian impetus holds the promise of a critical break from the ideological stranglehold of the historical present (291).
My own selection and interpretation of narratives that, through their portrayal of marginalized collectivities, envision alternative secular publics, is undeniably shaped by a recognition of the utopian aspirations of cultural texts. At the same time, I concur with Jameson that the same texts can simultaneously reveal traces of the values and biases of their own class, caste, gender, sexuality, etc. In the next chapter of this dissertation, I examine the ‘Emergency’ (1975-77) as an important transformative moment in the history of Indian nationalism and of state formation. I argue that, while on the one hand, it signified the betrayal of a nation’s faith in the viability of the modernist experiment of ‘planned development’ and weakened democratic institutions and norms, on the other, it opened up the ground for challenging elite imaginings for India by providing fresh impetus for political and cultural mobilization and struggle in the name of civil rights that the Nehruvian model had promised but failed to deliver. Through an analysis of political speeches and writings as well as fictional accounts, by O.V. Vijayan and Rohinton Mistry, of the crisis of nationalism and democratic governance characteristic of the mid-seventies, I seek to foreground the erasures and appropriations by which bourgeois visions of the secular nation are sought to be normativized and the challenges posed by the ‘marginalized’ to such hegemonic national narratives.

Chapter 3 is concerned with the “problem of the undesirable past” as it is configured in current writings on secularism in India (Chakrabarty 39). It takes as its point of departure a recent critique by historian Dipesh Chakrabarty that the modern (read Leftist) Indian intellectual has failed to dialogue with what in every day parlance is understood as ‘tradition’ except in the binary terms set by Enlightenment thought. I critically evaluate the claim that the cultural coordinates of Hindu communalism cannot be resisted unless secular commitments take cognizance of the ‘past,’ not simply as something that must be transcended on the road to
progress and development but as a continual presence that haunts our everyday beliefs and practices. Mahesh Dattani’s dramatic exploration of the ubiquitous narrative of Partition (1947) in contemporary instances of inter-religious strife in Final Solutions (1993); Girish Karnad’s interpretation of an abortive social revolution in twelfth-century Karnataka in Tale Danda (1989); and Kannada playwright H. S. Shiva Prakash’s controversial treatment of the same ‘event’ in his 1993 play Mahachaitra offer three distinct theatrical reconfigurations of ‘tradition’ that provide the testing ground for my analysis.

Chapter 4 evaluates challenges to the ‘national integration’ argument predicated on the liberal idea of universal citizenship by the mobilization of political parties on grounds of caste affiliation. Fiction, autobiography, as well as dramatic renderings of Dalit ‘experience’ by writers like Imayam, Mahasweta Devi and Datta Bhagat present the discursive ground for evaluating the capability and extent to which a caste-identified group politics that takes social justice as its starting point can form the bedrock for a secular polity.

The fifth chapter shifts the parameters of the debate from a focus on community identity to the contradictions surrounding contemporary articulations of secularism and citizenship in the context of women’s social and sexual rights. Urban street theater emerging from activist mobilization around questions of gender and sexuality forms the basis of my argument for secularizing feminist discourse and politics through a critical reframing of sexuality and the subject of sex within a ‘queer’ framework.

The texts discussed here span the last quarter of the twentieth century. Some of these works were originally composed in English while several are translations from Indian languages to which I have limited access. Still others were originally written in languages (Hindi, Tamil and Kannada) with which I can claim varying degrees of linguistic and cultural familiarity.
While regional specificity and the politics of translation merit attention and critical engagement in and of themselves, they are not central to this enterprise. In other words, I am aware that my analytical focus on the ‘national’ results in a certain homogenization and flattening out of particularities. Even as I remain vigilant and attempt to underscore, to the extent possible, the implications and elisions attendant upon my choices, I regard them as inevitable and at times, even necessary, bearing in mind the structuring rubric (of nationalism and secularism) of this dissertation.
CHAPTER 2
POLITICAL FICTIONS: THE ‘EMERGENCY’ REVISITED

Introduction

In Nayantara Sahgal’s 1985 novel Rich Like Us, a civil servant abruptly dismissed from the central government during the authoritarian Emergency regime of the mid-seventies finds herself questioning the continuing role of the Executive in a political and moral universe where the distinction between state power and civic responsibility has become hopelessly confused. “Our job was to stay free of the political circus,” Sonali reflects as she is forced to confront the collective culpability of the civil service in legitimating state absolutism and repression through their ignorance, silence, apathy, and active consent (24). Gazing out the window of her office at the imposing edifices symbolizing the world’s largest democracy, Sonali is struck by irony at the deceptive normalcy of the capital city and the blindness of its citizens, as they transact their daily tasks, to the fundamental and irrevocable change that is about to befall them:

If anything surprised me, it was only that I had sat at my desk and worked, believing change for the better would come while I sat there, so long as I handled my files properly and made the right recommendations. All would be well because there was a building outside my office called Parliament. Yet an epoch had come to an end in ways we did not recognize. (Sahgal 31, emphasis mine)

Listening to her bureaucrat colleagues, lawyers, businessmen, newspaper editors, teachers and her middle class friends and family herald the Congress Supremo’s new policies as radical and progressive, Sonali recalls her father’s lifelong admonition that democracy, the tenuous outcome of the struggles and sacrifices of many generations, is too important to be left to leaders and that its preservation and expansion require the alertness and accountability of all citizens.

Although the novel was published after Indira Gandhi’s assassination, Sahgal, niece of Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira’s cousin, remained a vocal critic of the Emergency regime both during and after the prime minister’s term in office. Today, the Emergency is rarely recalled,
much less studied in a sustained manner. Occasionally invoked as a rhetorical strategy by members of oppositional parties, especially the Right wing, Hindu majoritarian BJP, to embarrass the Congress during electoral campaigns in an effort to gain political mileage or refute charges of authoritarianism leveled against their own governments, the ‘event’ has, barring a few exceptions, faded from the public realm. In academic discourse, this absence may, in part, be the result of an overall cynicism with all manifestations of the political that accompanied critiques of nationalisms and the universalizing nation-state project and research into ‘non-national’ formations and identities from the mid-eighties onwards. Today, as the state continues to yield to the global market and civil society organizations (NGOs and other social movements) have assumed the ‘developmentalist’ function, the relationship of the state and the ‘people’ has also undergone significant changes. This is not to imply that the institutions and functionaries of the state, however insufficient and flawed these may be, no longer impact the lives and interests of citizens. In the majority of cases, the ever-expanding NGO sector works in varying degrees of collaboration with, rather than against, both the state and international funding agencies. A recent survey conducted by scholars affiliated to the Developing Countries Research Center, University of Delhi, for example, reveals that, contrary to expectations, the poorest citizens in India continue to invest in the idea of political participation and “problem solving through government” despite their recognition of the state’s disappointing record in providing basic rights and services for various sections of the population (Harris 1041-1054; Chandhoke 1033-1039).\(^\text{12}\) This chapter uses the Emergency as a lens for examining the complex and unresolved

\(^{12}\) Both articles respond to the aforementioned survey results from Delhi. The project, funded by ‘The Future State’ Research Center at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, has conducted similar studies in Sao Paulo, Mexico City, Coimbatore and Bangalore.
relationship between ‘people’ and their *sarkar*\(^{13}\) by critically reintegrating the somewhat ignored ‘political’ dimension into current historical and literary debates and reflections on questions of identity, community and citizenship.

Social theorists Ashis Nandy and Emma Tarlo have recently analyzed the nexus of politics and nationalist historiography in erasing the Emergency from public memory toward consolidating a progressivist narrative of the Indian nation-state. Yet, even when occasionally referenced in popular discourse, the moment continues to be regarded in relative isolation from larger structures and formations and from the continuing role and relationship of the state toward various sections of the population; as an accident or aberration produced by the singular ambitions of specific political players and unlikely to recur; a temporary blot on an otherwise democratic, postcolonial national landscape.

My interest in revisiting the Emergency through its political and literary representations is dictated by an emphasis on the moment as crucial to ongoing debates, in India, about democracy, identity/difference and citizenship. I would like to argue that, in signifying a departure from the vision of nation-building first articulated during the anti-colonial struggle but never realized, the events of 1975-7 restructured, in important ways, the purpose and connection of the state and the people at various levels and provided renewed impetus to forces, alliances and ideologies toward the consolidation of social movements based on caste, gender and religion that have dominated the Indian scene thereafter. My treatment of the Emergency as fundamentally transformative and instituting “a new modality of historical action” is analogous to the work of social scientists Veena Das and Emma Tarlo (Das 5). Das’s anthropological study of contemporary India, from

---

\(^{13}\) Literally, ‘master’ or ‘provider’ in Hindi, the term is everyday parlance for ‘government.’ Probably derived from colonial rule but since divested of any overtly negative connotations, it is sometimes used synonymously with *mai-baap*, or ‘mother and father,’ and testifies to the paternalistic relationship between the state and its citizens.
which Tarlo derives her interpretive framework for studying the Emergency, is structured around what she calls “critical events.” Citing Francois Furet’s analysis of the French Revolution, Das focuses on Partition, Sikh militancy in the Punjab and the Bhopal Gas Tragedy as “critical events” in her own work, describing these as bringing about “new modes of action … which redefined traditional [cultural] categories” and through which “new forms were acquired by a variety of political actors, such as caste groups, religious communities, women’s groups and the nation as a whole” (6). Additionally, Das underscores that “the terrains on which these events were located crisscrossed several institutions, moving across family, community, bureaucracy, courts of law, the medical profession, the state, and multi-national corporations” (ibid.).

In foregrounding the Emergency as a “critical event,” I do not seek to mark the moment as originary and divorced from the events and structures that preceded it. Rather, in acknowledging its continuity, I seek precisely to underline its structural and institutional constitutiveness and historicity. To this end, my focus on the nineteen months during which civil liberties were suspended by the state, and democratic institutions and norms severely compromised is underpinned and informed by the imperatives and imaginings that propelled the Nehruvian ideal of a secular India where “social justice” would “proceed side by side with economic progress” (“Election Manifesto” 414); the negotiations and compromises that were needed to sustain it; and the contests and contradictions that beset an embattled and progressively weakening state that finally resorted to authoritarianism in a desperate bid to maintain its rapidly eroding vision of India as a single, unified, political community.

My positing of the Emergency as formative also serves to locate it within a larger technique of government in modern democracies that Giorgio Agamben identifies as the “state of

---

14 The Manifesto was delivered at All India Congress Committee (AICC) session in Bangalore on 13 July 1951 and adopted the next day.
exception.” Critics of the Emergency have acknowledged that even though a “fictitious or political state of siege”—namely threats to national security and integrity—was established to justify the enactment of certain constitutional provisions in order to cripple the judiciary and suspend civil liberties and rights, the Constitution itself was never openly flouted (Agamben 4). In fact, the powers of the judiciary were severely curbed by the passing of a number of constitutional amendments in Parliament. The semblance of democratic governance was thus preserved. In other words, suspension of law or the norm did not mean its simple abolition. The “state of exception,” therefore, represents a “space devoid of law” that, nevertheless, maintains a necessary relationship to the juridical order as an “anomie” (Agamben 51). This “threshold of indeterminacy between democracy and absolutism” then radically transforms the “structure and meaning of the traditional distinction between constitutional forms” and becomes the dominant paradigm of government (Agamben 2-3).

Notwithstanding the significance of its specific political implications, the Emergency is also interesting as a discursive phenomenon. Rather than being uniformly repressive, the apparatuses of state power, understood in the Althusserian sense, produced their own localized and fragmented reactions and resistances. During its imposition and for a few years after, the Emergency generated multiple fictions, myths and counter-myths variously fashioned and interwoven by its perpetrators, the people of the country as well as international opinion on the future of Indian democracy. One the one hand, press censorship, the suppressing of discourse rigidly enforced facilitated the government’s creation of its own fictions, and helped lend credence and legitimacy to its programs and policies. The abolition of the autonomous Press Council accompanied the discrediting and removal from office of several Indian and foreign journalists and the assumption of a propagandist function by Samachar, the regime’s official
mouthpiece. On the other hand, as people grew more and more disillusioned with the excesses of
the administration and reports of nepotism and corruption and of detractors being arrested
without trial and tortured in state prisons started to proliferate, the government-controlled media
gradually lost its credibility. Rumor and hearsay gained currency, often acquiring a subversive
aspect that disrupted official versions of the ‘truth.’ It is to these myriad mythologizing impulses
that Rushdie’s Saleem Sinai – another maker of myths for whom “reality is a question of
perspective” – alludes, as he races against the clock to complete his tale before it is too late and
the world is forever transformed (197):

If the Mother of the Nation had a coiffure of uniform pigment, the Emergency she spawned
might easily have lacked a darker side. But she had white hair on one side and black on the
other; the Emergency, too, had a white part – public, visible, documented, a matter for
historians – and a black part which, being secret macabre untold, must be a matter for us.
(Midnight’s 501)

Implicit in Saleem’s formulation is a privileging of his own complex, polysemic narrative
over the more univocal thrust of conventional historiography. The former, Rushdie’s protagonist
suggests, is non-linear, fractured and individual, in contrast to the totalizing and depersonalizing
imperatives of official historical discourse. Yet, history itself is by no means monolithic just as
literature, like all institutionalized disciplines, is subject to the same material and ideological
paradigms, provisions and restrictions that regulate intellectual perusals in general. In the
sections that follow, my approach will be to read the discourses of history and literature,
themselves heterogeneous practices, as intertwined and mutually constitutive modes of
representation, allowing for each to interrogate and inform the other. Needless to add, in
selectively revisiting the discursive domain surrounding this formative period through the lens of
my particular theoretical problematic, I shall strive to remain alert to the narrativity and
constructedness of my own critique of the normative nation-state and its appropriation and
erasure of minorities in service to a hegemonic – gendered, classed, communal and ethnically
derived – national narrative.

A Fine Balance: Coalition Politics and the Rhetoric of Development

In his foreword to a book on the role of the state in a multi-religious and deeply
hierarchical society, Jawaharlal Nehru writes in 1961, “In a country like India, which has many
faiths and religions, no real nationalism can be built up except on the basis of secularity”
(“Secular State” 194). In an earlier directive intended for internal circulation among members of
Congress throughout the nation, he defines the secular as connoting not only religious freedom
regarding belief and practice -- and including the freedom not to believe -- overseen by an
impartial state but, more importantly, the idea of “social and political equality” (“Circular” 192).
Nehru’s coupling of the two forms of equality underscores their continuity under the aegis of an
empowered state as the primary instrument of nation-building. Composed two years prior to the
long awaited and much publicized mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism to escape an
oppressive Hindu caste order in 1956, the correspondence reads almost like a response to Dalit
leader and fellow Congressman B.R. Ambedkar’s assessment of the exclusionist and status quo-
ist propensities of an elite, Hindu dominated nationalism undergirded by what he diagnosed as a
basic contradiction between formal political equality established through the principle of
universal, adult franchise and continued social and economic disparity predicated on the
persistence of caste. Even though the paper does not allude to Ambedkar, Nehru’s introduction
of a correlation between secularism and nationalism whereby the former acts as a safeguard
against the inherently coercive and homogenizing effects of the latter, it seems to me, is
unmistakably informed by specific caste-based critiques of and initiatives against the Congress
led nationalist enterprise. Thus, in addition to acknowledging that a “caste-ridden society” can
never be “properly secular” the document affirms that religious freedom, as conceptualized by a
truly democratic state, must include the liberty to convert (Nehru, “Circular” 192). Interestingly however, Nehru’s endorsement of the freedom to proselytize is accompanied by a rider that expresses his own personal reservations against and inability to comprehend autonomous civic initiatives – invoking, no doubt, the one forged by Ambedkar -- that culminate in mass conversions.

I cite these documents here in order to make the following point. Composed several years after formal independence was first achieved, they reveal that the Nehruvian ideal -- the concept of constitutional democracy embodied in the so-called developmental initiatives of a strong and interventionist state – far from being unanimously hailed by the country and actualized, in fact, represented only one of many contending visions of the nation and, by extension, of a truly democratic India. Not only was it not forged out of popular consensus, it continued to have its critics both within and outside the Constituent Assembly responsible for its adoption. However, the “life of contradictions” (qtd. in Khilnani 15) that Ambedkar had identified in an exclusively state-centered democratic model in 1949, gradually became hegemonic under Nehru’s “Caesarist” (Chatterjee, Possible 16-17) leadership until, finally, even its most renowned opponent had no choice but to reluctantly endorse it as a means of Dalit empowerment.

Under Nehru, the program of state controlled, planned development – inspired by the example of the Soviet Union and Fabian socialism -- sought to balance conflicting class interests in society through the system of parliamentary democracy. To this end, the national bourgeoisie comprising the urban industrial class, the rural, propertied class, and the bureaucratic elite entered into what Sudipta Kaviraj has called “benefit coalitions” to achieve “capitalist ‘passive revolution’” through an elaborate program of state driven, reformist, economic development (“Critique” 54, 59). In this context, the Congress Party and government had the task not only of
maintaining a flexible coalition of ruling forces at the central and state levels but also of
affirming the state’s relative neutrality and democratic credentials in the eyes of the masses
through nominal programs and policies for social change and redistributive justice.

However, Nehru’s emphasis on industrialization led to the neglect of the agrarian sector
and land reform, which would have meant alienating powerful landed interests within the ruling
coalition, was minimal and uneven. This and India’s defeat in the war with China in 1962 led to
an acute food and economic crisis in the country and resulted in a decline in Congress
popularity.\textsuperscript{15} Nehru attempted to make amends by emphasizing agricultural reform in the
Second Five Year Plan but the move met with stiff opposition both from the bourgeois coalition
at the national level and state level Congress leaders who were afraid that such a proposal would
lose them the support of the rural elite. It would be up to Indira Gandhi to find a way out of this
dilemma and carry forward Nehru’s proposal during her tenure as prime minister several
years later.

Following Lal Bahadur Shastri’s unexpected death in 1966, Indira Gandhi inherited a party
and a state that were deeply divided. I use the word ‘inherited’ because she was never meant to
be prime minister so that her nomination to the premiership of the Congress was prompted more
by a perception of her weakness and ambiguity and her connection to Nehru than any serious
qualifications for leadership (Kaviraj “Indira Gandhi” 1697). Her frequent letters to friend and
confidant Dorothy Norman in the sixties, for example, reveal a lonely and troubled individual,
caught between what she perceived to be her loyalty to her father/nation and her own lack of
self-worth and dissatisfaction with a life lived entirely in the public domain (Norman 103). Not
surprisingly, the Congress Syndicate composed almost exclusively of senior male politicians

\textsuperscript{15} For a detailed analysis of ‘planned development’ under Nehru, see Partha Chatterjee, \textit{A Possible India} and
“Development Planning and the Indian State.”
many of whom had been active in the anti-colonial movement and in Nehru’s Cabinet saw her as a mere figurehead who did not stand for any clear ideology or policies and who could, therefore, be manipulated at will in accordance with the preferences of the ruling elite. In other words, Indira Gandhi’s initial ascendance to power was not accompanied by the support of either an electorate or a party. Her first test as national leader came in the run up to the General Elections of 1967, a moment that I shall now proceed to examine.

The Making of ‘Mother India’

In his The Philosophy of Right, Hegel advances a notion of “ethical life” that transcends the domain of individual needs and self-centeredness that characterizes bourgeois civil society. He identifies the ‘family’ as the nascent moment of this ideal where immediate personal interests and differences between members are suppressed through a bond constituted by ‘natural’ love, altruism and regard for unity and wholeness. For Hegel, the bourgeois family with its emphasis on interdependence and mutual self-sacrifice provides the self-seeking and rootless individual with “a feeling, a consciousness and a will, not limited to individual personality and interest, but embracing the common interests of the members generally” (qtd. in Ehrenberg 124). However, this ‘unity’ is fleeting as well as unreflective and cannot, therefore, provide a model that is broad and universal enough to encompass society as a whole (Chandhoke 35). By contrast, civil society is the domain of autonomy and particularity but it is also the arena where the individual can be socialized into an understanding of ethical community as the only true realization of freedom. Hegel writes, “The right of individuals to be subjectively destined to freedom is fulfilled when they belong to an actual ethical order, because their conviction of their freedom finds its truth in such an objective order, and it is in an ethical order that they are actually in possession of their

16 For a nuanced exploration of Indira Gandhi as a “gendered subaltern subject” in Indian politics, see Gita Rajan, “Subversive Subaltern Identity: Indira Gandhi as the Speaking Subject.”
own essence or their own inner universality” (109). This “objective order” is the ‘state,’ which marks the supreme “culmination” of the “ethical moments of the family and civil society” (Ehrenberg 129, 131). In its universality, it encapsulates and integrates civil society’s particularity by transcending it toward a higher unity. In the rest of this section, I will attempt to argue that Indira Gandhi’s mercurial rise to power, which culminated in the authoritarianism of the seventies, was marked by her deliberate self-creation as the ultimate embodiment of the Hegelian National Spirit by exploiting the twin narratives of ‘family’ and ‘state.’ It bears reiteration that I do not wish to posit the Emergency as the result of a purely personal crisis of authority removed from larger systemic configurations for I concur with Sudipta Kaviraj’s claim that, more often than not, ‘events’ are shaped by a complex combination of and interactions between the “contingent” and the “structural” (“Indira Gandhi” 1703-4).

Although she had formal charge of the government apparatus as leader of the majority party in Parliament, Gandhi felt constrained from exercising power independently of Congress stalwarts like Kamaraj, Krishna Menon and Morarji Desai who saw her as a mere pawn for furthering their own political ambitions. Her visit to the United States in 1966 to solicit US aid as a means to redressing India’s food and financial crises signaled a departure from Nehru’s program of ‘non-alignment’ and the official devaluation of the Indian rupee met with much denunciation from both within the party and the media. In December of the same year, she made what, I think, was a crucial announcement to the press that laid out her political strategy for the years to come. She said, “Here is a question of whom the party wants and whom the people want. My position among the people is uncontested” (qtd. in Frank 300).

Her flouting of party protocol by her direct appeals to the electorate was carefully structured by a language of domestic affiliation and intimacy. In repeatedly invoking her
connection to India’s founding ‘fathers’ Nehru and Gandhi, she was able cement a filial bond with the people whom she addressed as her ‘brothers and sisters.’ Her public persona, perfected by her dress, language, and style of leadership, enabled her to efface her own privileged background and heritage and embrace the nation as her family.17 Biographers and critics of Indira Gandhi have pointed to these and related strategies in their analyses of her politics. However, I contend that there is more to the story. In order to be politically effective, Gandhi had to go beyond merely positioning herself as ‘one of the people.’ She had to set herself apart from her electorate even while she went to great lengths to emphasize her ‘sameness.’ This ‘identity-in-difference’ is implicit in a rousing speech made during an election campaign in eastern India in 1967. Here is a brief extract:

My family is not confined to a few individuals. It consists of crores of people. Your burdens are comparatively light, because your families are limited and viable. But my burden is manifold because crores of my family members are poverty-stricken and I have to look after them. Since they belong to different castes and creeds, they sometimes fight among themselves, and I have to intervene, especially to look after the weaker members of my family, so that the stronger ones do not take advantage of them. (qtd. in Frank 303)

Three related moves are implicit in this quotation. First, ‘family,’ a metonym for the nation, binds individuals together in a relationship of mutual concern and dependence. Unlike political institutions, families are strictly hierarchical and undemocratic in their functioning but they are organic entities whose preservation necessitates the harmonizing of individual interests in service to a larger good.18 But -- and this is the second move -- families are “limited” in their

---

17 In her essay, Rajan argues, convincingly, that Indira Gandhi’s agency lay in inscribing herself, as daughter, mother and widow, within a culturally dominant patriarchal discourse and carefully deploying the ‘cultural lack’ signified by these identities to subversive ends in her acquisition of power and status within politics and society.

18 The Sangh Parivar (literally, ‘united family’) which comprises various political groups that constitute the Hindu Right is also organized on the basis of the hierarchical and gendered logic of the family and invokes the Hegelian idea of a National Spirit by representing the nation in the dual images of pitrubhumi (fatherland) and punyabhumi (holy land).
vision for ultimately, their unity is unreflective and narrow. Moreover, as Hegel points out, the bond that keeps families together dissipates as children mature, leave their parents’ home, enter civil society and become mutual competitors for material advantages. Individuals and their communities, based on religion and caste, therefore, need a ‘state,’ not only to act as their protector and provider but also to socialize them into realizing that true freedom comes with surrendering private interests in favor of collective (read national) ends. In other words, the fundamental essence of the state is not “the unconditional protection and guarantee of the life and property of members of the public as individuals. On the contrary, it is that higher unity which even lays claim to this very life and property and demands its sacrifice” (Hegel 71). The third move, predicated on the establishment of a metonymic relation between state and leader legitimates the latter’s prerogative not only to “intervene” on behalf of the dispossessed and the downtrodden but also to demand sacrifices, of personal liberty and rights, in the name of universal order.

Indira Gandhi’s naturalization of authority through the rhetoric of family and remarkable substitution of her person for party and state, strategies determined by their expediency for her immediate political survival at the time, would have grim consequences both for the Congress and the parliamentary system as a whole in decades to follow. Her ascendance to the status of national icon would be echoed in Dev Kant Barooah’s jingoistic but telling slogan “Indira is India and India is Indira.” A letter to Dorothy Norman following the Congress’s landslide victory and her election as prime minister in 1971, this time by a popular vote, reveals Gandhi’s own sense of immense, personal achievement and vindication against the so-called hate campaigns and vilification by her political opponents. Of the nationwide campaigns and the enthusiasm and voluntary participation, in them, of thousands of ordinary citizens, she writes, “The elections
became a sort of movement – a people’s movement.” Repeatedly emphasized, in the letter, is her own centrality and success in forging public opinion and rallying the nation in support of her party:

Thus, from village after village we got news that when our sympathizers went to campaign, they were stopped at the entrance and asked for whom they stood. If they took my name, they were welcomed … or told that the village vote was solid for us and therefore they need not waste their time. Taxi drivers and scooter rickshaw drivers not only offered the use of their vehicles free but themselves paid for the petrol … The peasant, the worker, and above all, the youth cut across all caste, religious and other barriers to make this their own campaign ….” (qtd. in Norman 130-1)

The uninterrupted link established, in Nehru’s paradigm, between political empowerment and social justice whereby civic initiatives are often initiated and always guided by a welfarist state becomes embodied, by the end of the sixties, in the person of the prime minister.

The systemic changes brought about by Indira Gandhi’s premiership following the Congress Party split of 1969 are too complex and numerous to outline here. Suffice it to say that her populist and personalized leadership led to a centralization of state power and a weakening of the federal structure of Congress. Various strategies deployed to either eliminate or co-opt oppositional factions also spelled a decline in the multi-party system of government as well as state institutions and ideology and issue-based politics.19 Rising corruption, inefficiency, unemployment and inflation led to widespread anti-government protests and campaigns in states like Gujarat and Bihar. Matters reached a head in 1975 when the Allahabad High Court accused Gandhi of engaging in election malpractices and asked her to step down as prime minister. Once again, Indira Gandhi demanded that the people sacrifice their civil rights to safeguard national

19 Congress lost the federal structure it had enjoyed under Nehru and Shastri and absolute and arbitrary powers vested in the hands of a small ‘coterie’ close to the prime minister led to corruption and mismanagement as well alienation and loss of accountability of leaders from their social bases. Populist measures like bank nationalization, restrictions on big business and agricultural reform, undertaken in the early years, were reversed in favor of bourgeois interests when the ruling coalition threatened to collapse. As the Indira hatao (‘remove Indira’) slogans grew louder in the run up to the 1971 elections, they were sought to be silenced by yet another empty populist cry of garibi hatao (remove poverty).
integrity, arguing, in fact, that “desirable as democracy is, the country is greater” (Consolidating 213).

The Emergency, imposed on June 26, 1975, was justified on the grounds of an urgent national crisis brought about by a threat to secularism that necessitated stringent measures. At a public meeting in Chandigarh in December, she argues in favor of continuation of Emergency rule beyond six months on the grounds that “evil forces” to the Left and Right are determined to destroy the nation’s secular fabric without which the unity of India cannot be preserved (Consolidating 77-78). The connection between secularism, civic responsibility and national integrity, encapsulated in the Emergency catchphrase “disciplined democracy” enjoined that fundamental ‘rights’ of citizens be subordinated to their social ‘duties.’ Principally, this involved legitimating concentration of power in a centralized state, represented by a single, uncontested majority party, to better enable it to safeguard national security and act as an agent of social and economic change. The regime was, therefore, founded on the paradoxical claim that undermining democracy in order to forestall its collapse into anarchy, a necessary and inevitable step in the process of ‘development’ would, in the long term, serve only to deepen its appeal and social purpose.

This theme, repeatedly reinforced in speeches and interviews throughout the period, is explored in searching detail in an address to the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London as early as 1971. In her analysis, Gandhi emphasizes the need for a “creative application” of the Westminster parliamentary model to the “vastly different economic and social problems of India.” To this end, she endorses a “guided democracy” that does not become “a

20 Sudipta Kaviraj makes the important point that at least in its initial stages, the Emergency regime effectively co-opted both the Left and the Right through its two-pronged campaign against poverty removal and elimination of the so-called threat from Pakistan (1701). To my mind, the anti-Pakistan stand was also a sign that Congress was no longer averse to playing the ‘communal’ card to win votes, a dangerous, populist trend that resulted in the exacerbation of center-state conflicts in Punjab and Kashmir leading to the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984.
shield” for the “subversion of freedom” and for those who exploit the “superficial” differences of caste, religion and region” to break “India’s fundamental unity” for personal interest and gain (India 181-2). The regime led to the collapse of the delicate balance of class forces at the national and regional levels and uneven development generated oppositional movements in different parts of the country. The most significant of these, and the one into which numerous other factions ultimately coalesced, was the ‘JP movement.’

_Sampoorna Kranti: The Doctrine of ‘Total Revolution’_

In his _Prison Diary_, composed during four months of solitary incarceration without trial in a state prison following his clandestine arrest in the early hours of June 26, 1975, veteran socialist and leader of the Opposition Jayaprakash Narayan struggles to comprehend how a peaceful movement that sought to “widen the horizons of our democracy” by encouraging citizens to “awaken and organize” could have aided, instead, in the establishment of fascism (1-2). A long-standing critic of parliamentary democracy and party politics, JP was best known, prior to 1974, as an intellectual and social activist who had sought, in his lifetime, to synthesize Marxism, socialism, Gandhism and certain indigenous, communitarian traditions in an attempt to forge a pluralistic “partyless democracy” founded on direct participation and need-based (as opposed to power-driven) initiatives. A former nationalist and Congressman who cautioned Nehru, in the nineteen-forties, against conflating statism and socialism and who left the party to nurture his own vision of _lok shakti_ [people’s power], Jayaprakash had sought, in subsequent decades, to develop an autonomous politics of the people distinct from the politics of the state. To this end, he supported fellow Gandhian Vinoba Bhave’s plan to extend the spirit of non-violent revolution embodied in the Gandhian doctrine of _satyagraha_ [civil disobedience] toward radical social and moral reconstruction. _Sarvodaya_, a movement composed entirely of non-partisan workers, undertook the task of persuading landlords to voluntarily give up a portion of
their lands to peasants. Unlike the Communist-led Naxalite movement, which modeled its strategies on Maoist principles and sanctioned coercion and armed insurgency in order combat upper caste domination of land and agricultural production as means to peasant empowerment, the *bhoodan* [literally, land-gifting/donation] and *gramdan* movements were strictly based on a Gandhian belief in the possibility of justice through consciousness-raising and moral and attitudinal transformation. In an article titled “A Plea for Gandhism,” composed during the heyday of Nehruvian supremacy in the early nineteen-fifties, JP elaborates on the importance of restoring the liberatory potential of socialism by resuscitating it from its current state of collapse into parliamentarianism, state capitalism and dictatorship:

> A real revolution is a revolution in the values of life…. Most of us think it is only when we capture power that we shall be able to build up socialism by legislation and state power. If we persist in this legalistic concept of social revolution, we are going to suffer the same disillusionment as socialists in the west.

> Gandhism does not concentrate on the capture of state power, nor depend on the power of the state. It goes direct to the people and helps them effect the revolution in their lives and the life of the community. Support from the state power would be assured once the power of the people has been created. (Towards 160-1)

His writings and speeches throughout the fifties and sixties reinforce his distrust of statecraft and his faith in the creative potential of civil dissent and public power. However, the seventies represent a shift in focus and reveal a growing ambivalence in his approach to politics. In fact, I shall attempt to argue that, in the final analysis, his program for change crystallized and acquired

---

21 Gandhi’s approach to caste inequality in the nineteen-twenties had been based on similar, reformist initiatives. Unlike Ambedkar who held that Hinduism was a system of institutionalized social, economic, cultural and moral inequality within which Dalits would never be free, Gandhi defended the caste system as an important organizing principle of Hindu society. He spoke out against ‘untouchability’ but discouraged ‘conversion’ to escape caste oppression as divisive and, ultimately, detrimental to national unity. Instead, Gandhi called for internal reform of Hinduism. This involved mass campaigns to persuade upper caste Hindus to end discrimination through exclusive appeals to their morality and goodwill. The paternalism implicit in the term *harijan* (Gandhi’s coinage for ‘untouchables,’ literally ‘children of God’) and in social programs such as ‘temple entry’ (1933) came under severe attack from Dalit leaders like Ambedkar. For a sustained account of the differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar on the issues of Dalit self-assertion, caste and Hinduism, see especially B.R. Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables.*
authority through the very institutions and structures that JP had made it his lifelong mission to repudiate. And, these formations ultimately compromised and spelled the dissolution of the ideals upon which the movement itself was based.

In his diary and in an interview to a close associate exactly a year after the imposition of Emergency rule, JP acknowledges his error in assuming that neither the Congress Party nor the people of India would stand by passively and watch democracy be replaced by totalitarianism. Despite his obvious dismay and disbelief, I find the conversation illuminating for two reasons. First, it presupposes the existence of democracy in India before June 1975. And secondly, JP designates that the immediate task before the mass movement, notwithstanding its ultimate goal of ‘total revolution,’ concerns \textit{restoration} of the “fundamentals of democracy” to their former state before “the rights of speech, association, movement, etc., were suddenly taken away by Mrs. Gandhi” (Towards 179-91). Reversing his \textit{Sarvodaya} strategy of civil disobedience and direct action through mass participation outside the realm of party politics, he writes in his diary, “If parliamentary elections are announced to be held at the scheduled time, I would advocate stoppage of the confrontation with government and call for an all-out effort to win the elections” (Prison 89).

I maintain that the Emergency was thus successful in domesticating a program once conceived as a radical alternative to constitutional democracy. Through its reincarnation in the very terms it set out to re-envision, no doubt a necessary and inevitable response to the moment, the JP movement was successfully co-opted into party politics. However, evidence of this shift in emphasis, which culminated in the exclusive restructuration of the movement as a purely reactive political opposition to Congress dominance, can be traced back to the early seventies and the consolidation of the Bihar movement. In order to expand the scope of \textit{Sarvodaya} in 1973, J.P.
encouraged students, professionals and intellectuals without specific political investments to support workers and farmers in their **gramdan** initiatives. This change in the composition of ‘revolutionaries’ diversified the goals of the movement which began to incorporate both rural and urban concerns. Additionally, increasing political corruption, nepotism, rising prices and unemployment in the Congress-led state of Bihar concentrated attention toward and the need for intervention within the domain of mainstream politics. The notion of selecting and promoting ‘people’s candidates’ through local village institutions or **gram sabhas** escalated into direct opposition to state power via a call for a ‘parallel’ revolutionary government. Brutal police crackdowns on **Sarvodaya** volunteers and gestures of solidarity by right wing parties, like the Hindu majoritarian Jana Sangh, opposed to the Congress-Communist combination at the Center resulted, in 1974, in the J.P. movement emerging as a new political opponent to Gandhi’s rule.22 Curiously, even as he became more and more dependent on the political opposition to steer the movement, Jayaprakash convinced his supporters that participation in politics, rather than compromising the movement would, in fact, cause parties to “undergo a sea-change” and convert to the larger objectives of ‘total revolution.’ (Prison 50). However, his writings demonstrate that his apparent optimism was constantly plagued by misgivings and self-doubt for, in the same entry, he remarks:

> There is no doubt that if the movement had not got mixed up with Opposition parties, its character, its experimental utility, its educative value, its ability to enable the people to see

---

22 The Left, comprising the CPI, the CPI(M) and the CPI(ML), had different responses to the Emergency. The CPI supported the regime, the CPI(M) opposed it but refused to strengthen its base by joining the JP coalition on the grounds that the latter was dominated by the right wing Hindu Jana Sangh and its affiliates, and the CPI(ML) committed to peasant struggle along Maoist lines, was banned by the ruling regime, along with several other ‘extremist’ organizations, in 1975.
their problems with their own eyes … to change themselves and change their material and social environment … would not have been compromised.

But the ideal never gets translated into practice without suffering deterioration … True, if the movement had been confined to the Savodaya workers alone and its principle was to keep away all political parties (including the ruling party), it would have been possible to keep them away. But then, there would have been no people’s movement. (Prison 56)

By forcing both the Opposition and the Left to acknowledge the advantages, however limited, of an elite-led democracy over a dictatorship, the Emergency blunted the radical edge of both factions and replaced their socialist agendas by populist ones.23 It reduced social struggle to political demands for resources via the constitutional language of rights, thereby reinforcing state power. Democracy became synonymous with electoral calculations and power politics. An ever-expanding bureaucracy increasingly subservient to the political leadership began to permeate every aspect of civic life. Land and educational reform undertaken in the early decades after independence, though minimal, had led to the empowerment (economic and political) of a new class of farmers belonging to the middle castes. Disenchanted by Indira Gandhi’s privileging of big business over their interests during the Emergency years, they joined forces to break brahmanical Congress hegemony by forming new ‘caste’ based parties at the regional and state levels. And the JP Movement which, by now, had recast its goals solely in terms of its opposition to Gandhi’s authoritarian rule, lent credibility and facilitated renewed mobilization by the Hindu Right which had remained relatively insignificant and discredited in the years following Partition and the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi.24

23 Agamben’s thesis interrogates precisely this confusion of the state of exception and dictatorship in the work of earlier theorists like Schmitt, Friedrich and Rossiter. In treating the Emergency not simply as an aberration but as fundamental to contemporary understandings and debates about politics and the nature and functioning of Indian democracy, I endorse Agamben’s position that the state of exception occupies a “zone of indifference” which is “neither external nor internal to the juridical order” and where suspension of the norm does not amount to its abolition (23).

24 Gandhi’s assassin Nathuram Godse was a member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (R.S.S.), the so-called cultural wing of the Hindu right.
The return, to power, of Congress and a triumphant, but seemingly contrite, Indira Gandhi after the Janata Party debacle of 1977-79 ensured that the Emergency would not be subjected to extensive scrutiny by the ideological apparatuses of the state. However, the horrors and humiliations to which ordinary citizens were subject in this bleak period provided copious material for fiction. Many writers told dark, menacing tales of a world suddenly stripped of logic and certitudes where terror, mistrust, madness and desolation dominated all human actions and relationships. The forced sterilization and slum clearance drives and torture of political prisoners by the regime formed the subject of numerous prison memoirs, personal narratives and short stories. However, the two novels selected for analysis in this section, in keeping with the central problematic of the chapter, offer the space for examining the intricacy and critique of issues related to nationalism and democracy, to the relationship of the people and their sarkar and to contending visions of India in the shadow of the Emergency. Composed almost a decade apart, by authors operating within very different literary and linguistic communities and registers, the two texts explore the semiotic significance of the Emergency as refracted through the ideological predilections of their distinct histories. And, in doing so, they not only interrogate elite and totalizing visions of India but allow for the complex interplay and envisioning of heterogeneous and alternative social and political forms and arrangements.

Political cartoonist and writer O.V. Vijayan’s The Saga of Dharmapuri (1988), first published in Malayalam as Dharmapuram in 1985, marks the passage of a tempestuous and
troubling decade in the life of the Indian republic symbolized, in many ways, by the brutal assassination, a year earlier, of Indira Gandhi, arguably the period’s most prominent and powerful political player. The non-realist, fable-like telling derived from *puranic* traditions owes, at least in part, to the text’s composition during the sinister years of surveillance and censorship that it chronicles. In allegorical mode, the novel presents a violent and bizarre portrait of a newly sovereign nation in the deadly grip of totalitarianism. The historical present, sordid, degenerate and despotic, is contrasted with an idealized past epitomized by Dharmapuri’s heroic struggle for freedom against the “Feringhee [literally, ‘foreign’] Empire.” After independence is won, however, the “Partisans,” former nationalists, fashion the “Convention of the Holy Spirit” in their frenetic scramble to grab state power. Values disintegrate into empty symbolism for even as they don tree-bark as a reminder of their impressive anti-colonial heritage; the members of the Convention actively court the “White Confederacy” and the “Red Tartar Republic” for financial credit in the name of a bogus poverty eradication program (Vijayan 15).26 Every time disparities widen and the masses turn restive, potential rebellions against state authority are successfully contained by displacing the people’s anger onto an enemy without. Mass patriotic hysteria, whipped up as the nation engages in periodic wars with its neighbors, helps the state maintain its hegemony by reiterating its renewed commitment to anti-imperialism.

The narrative, replete with scatological references that simultaneously startle and repulse, replicates in the telling, the putridity and decadence of a modern state apparatus that is corrupt, self-serving and unashamedly inegalitarian. The government, characterized by political hypocrisy, obsequiousness and the comprador character of the President, his Partisans and the

---

26 The allusion is, of course, to *khadi* or homespun cotton advocated by Gandhi during the anti-colonial struggle as a way of promoting self-sufficiency and self-rule (*Swadeshi*). The text implies that contemporary Congress endorsement of *khadi*, while serving to underscore its anti-colonial legacy and connections to the Father of the Nation, is an empty gesture devoid of any radical potential.
ruling bourgeois coalition composed of “the city’s tradesmen and pimps” (15) is supported by the “Communards” with their “ancient regime of historical and dialectical sorcery” (51) who are too blind in their mindless adoration of the Red Tartar Republic to envisage an independent program for social transformation. The opening pages focus on the President’s hedonistic tendencies evident in his excessive and disgusting indulgence in food and sexual pleasure. His supreme authority is uncontested save for a niggling suspicion in his own mind, born no doubt of a recognition of his government’s excesses, about the possible threat of an electoral defeat. To avert such a disaster, he declares “the State of Crisis” in Dharmapuri, calling for the people to trade their personal freedoms in exchange for national security:

The news was broadcast and printed that the country was besieged by the Enemy, and that neither the seas nor the mountains were defense enough …’My beloved people,’ the President said in a midnight broadcast, ‘give me your freedoms, henceforth let them be hidden inside me, because it is to rob you that the insidious enemy has penetrated us’… The Palace brought out colorful stamps of the President squatting among heaps of carrot and lettuce, munching on the vegetables and defecating – a picture of deep and enduring peace which reinforced the people’s faith in their pacific Presidency. (23)

The Communards support the new arrangement with even greater enthusiasm than some Partisans, seeing in the President’s cry for a systemic overhaul a mirror of the “Great Tartar Purges” that their arcane history books celebrate. In its haste to denounce Communism, a significant political presence in Kerala’s postcolonial landscape since Independence and a persistent thorn in the flesh of Congress leaders, for its apparent dogmatism and its transnational affinities and allegiances, the text fails to recognize the anti-Emergency interventions of the CPI (M) and the Naxalite and peasant insurgencies of the sixties and seventies which prompted the establishment to ban the CPI (ML) in 1975.27 The “proletariat” likewise hegemonized by the

27 Ironically, the text’s diagnosis of Communism’s failure to create an alternative society and system of governance echoes, almost exactly, the dubious logic used by Nehru – under pressure from Indira Gandhi – to dismiss a democratically elected Left government in the state of Kerala two decades earlier. Partha Chatterjee, analyzing Sarvapalli Gopal’s biography of Nehru, alludes to Nehru’s judgment about the “‘bookishness’” and ‘extra-territorial
state-capital nexus defends modern technology and warfare on the shortsighted assumption that they promote trade and employment and increase the state’s foreign exchange reserves. As a slavish and somnolent people allow tyranny to subsume their lives, the quest for an alternative vision grows progressively bleak as immorality, greed and egotism rule the day. In the final analysis, the text implies, both ruler and ruled must be held culpable for a social agreement gone so terribly wrong, “… the frivolous maker of history and the dim-witted subject who follows him into senseless war and death are both seers, chosen ones” (157).

The novel repeatedly stresses the classed character of social relationships. While a handful of the nation’s wealthy and powerful reap the benefits of the state’s willful surrender to global capitalist interests, the poor provide the nation with free labor and foreign exchange and may be allowed to reproduce only if they can guarantee strong and healthy offspring. The allusion to reproductive rights and their relation to issues of labor may be read as a direct indictment of one of the most controversial schemes undertaken during the Emergency and one that cost Indira Gandhi her credibility in years to come: the so-called ‘family-planning’ program for population control.28 However, in its treatment and denunciation of the despotic propensities of modern forms of technology and statecraft, this dark parable hints in the direction of an alternative ideal that, as I shall attempt to show, is equally if not more entrenched in oppressive and undemocratic structures.

As war upon war is waged in the relentless pursuit of peace, Dharmapuri’s citizens are called upon, by the state, to forfeit their conjugal and familial ties/rights in service to the nation.

---

27 Possible

28 Spearheaded by Indira Gandhi’s younger son Sanjay and his Youth Congress, the infamous sterilization drive mostly targeted minorities and the poor. In her biography of the prime minister, Katherine Frank points out that by the time the Emergency ended, the scheme had surpassed its original target of twenty-three million people (Frank 407).
Soldiers sent to guard national frontiers from unseen and dangerous enemies and made to suffer years of hardship and separation from loved ones often end up paying far too heavy a price. “...my genitals have been shorn by flying shrapnel, a most intimate sacrifice for the Motherland ...,” a recently decorated war hero confesses on his return home (153). His castration, a symbol of the nation’s emasculation by an authoritarian state, directs attention to a ‘natural’ (read ‘patriarchal’) order gone horribly wrong. Likewise, women, irrespective of their class, are reduced to the status of sexual objects by the ruling regime. On them falls the burden of earning their right to citizenship by prostituting themselves to politicians, bureaucrats and the police. To consolidate her credentials as a loyal national subject, Laavanya, the kitchen maid and wife to the soldier Vaatasena, must surrender her rights over her own body, enduring repeated sexual humiliation at the hands of the custodians of the country’s so-called honor and integrity. At the very bottom of the economic ladder, the washerman’s wife Pushpamukhee, a vital instrument in the state’s “program of reconstruction” (83) is a reproductive machine, “trad[ing] [her] breast milk for hard currency” (84) in order that the nation and her family may survive. As Jaralkaaruu, a child accused by his own parents of treason, is led to the gallows to be executed, knowledge finally dawns on the seer Siddhartha who realizes that evil has so infused the spineless citizens of Dharmapuri that “the love of one’s country” legitimates sacrifices like “the killing of children” (110). State power, rapacious and undemocratic, the text implies, has successfully severed the ideological thread that knits together ‘family’ and ‘nation’ in a relationship of mutual love and tolerance.

That the ‘moral’ order, in Vijayan’s novel, is embodied in the heterosexual/patriarchal family as the privileged site of love, commitment and nurture is evident in its repeated allusions to the absence or perversion of this ideal in the corrupt and degenerate world of Dharmapuri. In
holding up the President’s illegitimacy, infidelity as well as his homosexual propensities as markers of his moral corruption, the text imagines the idealized nation and abstract citizenship as ‘heteropatriarchal.’ The state’s culpability in perpetuating these ‘perverse’ practices is reiterated in a reference to soldiers’ wives who have succumbed to the temptations of “Sapphic love” (49) in the absence of their husbands who are away obeying their state’s call to duty:

In the cantonment, the Persuaders’ wives made love to the memories of their men, to fragile and elusive images … Mandakini bent over and kissed away [Sreelata’s] tears; then she kissed her on the lips. Neither woman knew how long the kiss lasted … And in such vice were quenched the rest of the ten thousand Persuaders’ wives. (49)

However, lesbianism, perhaps because the text is unable to conceive of it as occupying a space entirely oppositional to “the matrimonial bed” is denied any subversive potential in the novel, a classic case, to use M. Jacqui Alexander’s words, of heterosexuality’s inability to “imagine its own absence” (“Erotic” 98). But, as Alexander also points out, any invocation of the ‘natural’ necessitates a formulation of its ‘other.’ Thus like rape, prostitution, adultery, pederasty and necrophilia -- all of which mark the moral depravity of the regime -- lesbianism remains in the text as a foil to the strictly monogamous and life affirming, heterosexual ideal. However, the inherent instability of the ideal itself is its own real threat and Vijayan’s discourse locates this disruptive potential in the disturbing and unpredictable sexuality of women. The attrition of a moral (read ‘patriarchal’) order in which female sexuality is managed through surveillance and discipline within conjugality and reproduction raises the question of “erotic autonomy” (Alexander, “Erotic” 98) which carries with it the subversive potential to undo the heteropatriarchal foundations of the family and the nation. However, the timely return of the women’s husbands from battle and the restoration, however temporary, of order, contains this possibility in the novel and prevents the dangerous, albeit ever present, specter of miscegenation from becoming a reality:
Yet, beyond Sapphic fulfillment, the wives dreamt of wilder loves; Mandakini and Sreelata, as they slept together, dreamed together, and in their dreams they petitioned the Enemy: Sensuous Invader! Miscegenator of History! ... Our men, idle on the frontiers, waste their seed away. Invade us .... Tumult filled their dreams ...; the dreaming women opened the frontiers for the invader, they opened their flowers of lust. (Vijayan 49-50)

‘Utopia,’ if indeed there is such a place, is glimpsed in occasional images of women, not as sexual entities, but as mothers and nurturers; of fathers as providers for and protectors of women and children rather than as flesh traders and pimps; and of ‘love’ consecrated in the untainted matrimonial relation between man and woman, as the cornerstone of society. The notion that normative heterosexuality, predicated on a strictly gendered separation of spheres as well as sexual segregation, is oppressive for its operation through the social control of women’s sexuality and fertility in service to patriarchal/national interests is effaced in Vijayan’s textual discourse. As the “castration-neurosis” (74) continues in the nation’s capital Shantigrama, as yet unborn, future generations of “slumbering seeds” (77) accuse Dharmapuri’s opiate citizens of deep betrayal. The necessary correlation of peace and social justice with procreation -- and by extension, procreative sexuality within marriage -- locates authoritarianism within the realm of the sterile or non-procreative. Vaatasena makes this point quite explicitly in the novel, “... those that exercise power over their fellow-creatures have no right to procreate, nor do they deserve a requiem when they are gone” (91). The echoes from the Emergency are unambiguous. That the so-called killer of children and destroyer of a nation’s procreative potential was a ‘woman’ makes Indira Gandhi appear all the more monstrous (read ‘unfeminine’) within this gendered and misogynist discourse. Vaatasena’s assertion also serves to remind the reader that Sanjay Gandhi, generally perceived to have been the brain behind the ‘family planning’ program was the unfortunate product of Gandhi’s exercise of her own reproductive rights.

If, as the novel appears to suggest, the modern state is fundamentally undemocratic and prone to despotism, what is to become of the nation and its citizens? How can the brutal cycle of
war and violence be reversed? The regime’s effective neutralization of political opposition by a combination of repression and hegemony renders the prospect of change within existing structures of power, virtually impossible. However, dissent, though ultimately confounded, takes different forms in the novel. The first of these, a “mendicant” reported to be imprisoned and then dead and who never appears in the novel, may be read as a veiled reference to the Gandhian and former freedom fighter Jayaprakash Narayan who led the opposition movement against Indira Gandhi’s authoritarian regime and who was subsequently imprisoned along with several other ‘dissenters.’ However, this figure, though referenced as a possible savior from the present tyranny, does not so much as appear in the novel, testifying to Vijayan’s negative appraisal of the JP Movement as providing a cogent and practicable policy or program to replace the Congress led parliamentary system.

Similarly, the soldier Vaatasena’s single night of ‘awakening’ to thoughts of freedom from bondage ends in his violent and premature death; and Laavanya, victim of her class and gender, remains confined to acting out her resistance through abject strategies for personal survival that cannot map agendas for systemic change. This task, the text confers on the ‘celibate’ Siddhartha, the legendary ‘king’ who relinquished the material world and its pleasures to preach peace and brotherhood to his fellows. Firmly located outside the framework of modernity and echoing the ideals of Gandhism as embodied in the spirit of Sarvodaya and in JP’s early vision of a mass

---

29 Siddhartha was the name by which the Buddha was known before he renounced material pleasures and found ‘enlightenment.’ However, male celibacy is traditionally valorized as an upper caste Hindu ideal and provides a model of masculinity that complements, rather than contradicts, the heterosexual paradigm. In other words, brahmacharya usually associated with temporary abstinence from sex becomes a way of conserving the life force (semen) for urgent and superior political tasks like nation building. Invoked during the nationalist struggle by the likes of Vivekananda and Gandhi, celibacy constitutes an important aspect of the training of male cadre within the recruiting programs of the Hindu Right. It also facilitates Hindutva’s construction of its ‘other’ (the Muslim male) as prone to aggressive and uncontrolled sexuality.
people’s movement, Siddhartha’s quest for ‘enlightenment,’ in Vijayan’s novel, is inextricably linked to the indigenous, the spiritual and the traditional.

Paraashara, an army General turned pacifist and significantly also a bachelor, who leads the political revolt against the President and his Convention, draws his inspiration from the spiritual philosophy of Siddhartha. However armed conquest unaccompanied by spiritual transformation proves futile as the subjugated masses, hegemonized by the individualistic, technological and consumerist ethos of contemporary culture, disregard the spiritual alternative offered by Siddhartha and return to embrace the yoke of war, violence and deprivation. The novel’s resolution, essentially tragic, remains limited to nostalgic evocations of the unsullied unity of primeval civilizations but is unable to envision a collective strategy for change. Caught in the binary grid of tradition versus modernity where non-reproductive sexuality, i.e., sex for pleasure rather than procreation, comes to be associated, in part, with the moral chaos emblematic of the latter, the text’s quest for a truly liberating worldview capable of being translated into a concerted program for social transformation culminates in despair and resignation. Upon Siddhartha’s departure, the wretched citizens of Dharmapuri return “in the manner of beasts of slaughter” to the inexorable cycle of violence and dispossession, “smil[ing] to themselves, contented, … heads bent,” unquestioning (151).

In his introduction to Imaginary Homelands, Salman Rushdie asserts that the Emergency did much more damage to Indian social and political life than jail innocents and subject the poor to forced sterilizations for it was during this regime that “the lid flew off the Pandora’s box of communal discord” (3). In the quarter century since its first publication, his 1981 novel Midnight’s Children has been variously analyzed by critics as celebrating the chaos and creativity facilitated by the fragmentation of the Nehruvian national idea and as imbued with
nostalgia for a lost vision of an urbanized, secular modernity where a hegemonic ‘national culture’ would lead to the gradual erosion of ethnic and sectarian attachments and conflicts.\textsuperscript{30} I do not intend to enter into these critiques here. However, it is important to acknowledge that Rushdie’s complex exploration of the fraught yet creative tension between personal and national identities in his novel opened up the terrain for a new breed of Indian English writers. Like Rushdie, many of these writers emerged from third-world contexts but were/are global migrants with influence and currency in metropolitan centers of publishing and reception.

In Rushdie, the city of Bombay, India’s commercial capital with a hybrid and multi-religious and cultural heritage, toward which people from diverse classes, regions and religions gravitate in search of ‘work’ embodies a valued, yet fragile national idea. Even as the grim and violent reality of the Emergency unfolds, the protagonist Saleem Sinai recalls that he was brought up in Bombay “where Shiva Vishnu Ganesh Ahuramazda Allah and countless others had their flocks” (Midnight’s 521). However, as the state fans the flames of communalism and sectarian strife in the narrow interests of power, India’s “ancient national gift for fissiparousness” (476) finds renewed outlets as people reject the “new myth of freedom” and revert back to their atavistic loyalties and prejudices (294). In the final analysis, Saleem concludes fatalistically, the ‘national’ idea, a western import, has failed to take root in India for this is the place where “Europe repeats itself … as farce …” (221).

Rendered impotent and powerless by the regime, Saleem Sinai capitulates to fragmentation and disorder. But Ganesha, Bombay’s “trunk nosed, flap eared god” (177), a symbol of the city’s secular credentials and a fellow scribe is alive and well in an anonymous urban slum and holds in his hands, productive possibilities for the future. Ganesh/Aadam, the son of Saleem and Shiva

\textsuperscript{30} See, for example, M. Keith Booker ed., \textit{Critical Essays on Salman Rushdie}. 

61
(and Parvati, whose subjectivity has by this time been obliterated between the two men), “child of a time which damaged reality so badly that nobody ever managed to put it together again” (500) enters the world equipped with ‘magic’ and, one hopes, also a tougher will than his fathers to cope with the challenges of a new time, a different order.31

It is the city of Bombay, a realm, simultaneously, of freedom and exploitation that provides the setting for the social commentary of another “Third World Cosmopolitan” (Brennan 34) Rohinton Mistry’s 1995 novel A Fine Balance. Written in the shadow of the violent communal offensive that began with the demolition of an ancient Babri Mosque by the Hindu Right in Ayodhya in December 1992, Mistry’s realist novel takes the Emergency years as its point of reference for interrogating and reconfiguring, as I shall attempt to argue, both the bourgeois heterosexual family and the nation (-state) presumed to have been constituted in its image. A chilling tale that concerns the fates of four strangers whose paths cross amid the political turmoil of the mid-seventies, the novel presents a grim and scathing portrait of a decade of corruption and misrule which marked an important turning point in Indian social and political life.

The narrative opens with the arrival, in Bombay, of Ishwar and Om darji, lower caste cobblers turned tailors, in search of employment. For this struggling uncle and nephew, the city, secular and cosmopolitan, represents anonymity and freedom from the bonds of caste oppression and promises prospects for upward mobility through material advancement. However, modernity also has a darker, more menacing, aspect for the vast urban landscape spells loneliness, uncertainty and insecurity within what the tailors soon come to recognize as an individualistic and aggressively competitive ethos. Resources are limited and the population enormous and

31 By the time of The Moor’s Last Sigh (1995), Ganesha loses his charming and adorable quality and becomes a sinister and grotesque figure appropriated by the Hindu right to carry out its communal agendas and a symbol of the organization’s bigotry and violence. In this novel, Bombay, rendered corrupt and impersonal by foreign capital and communalized by the Shiv Sena is the scene of violent and vitriolic clashes in the post-Ayodhya period.
people must fight to stay alive. The Emergency regime undoes the work of the Nehru years -- when, as we are told, the tailors learned their trade in defiance of social prescription -- by withdrawing the government’s commitment to the poor and the marginalized, resulting in their even greater oppression at the hands of both the rural rich who acquire greater power under state patronage and the urban bureaucracy.

A second narrative thread revolves around the unfortunate circumstances of the widow Dina Dalal whose short-lived marriage to a pharmaceutical chemist, is followed by a life of humiliating financial dependence on her brother Nusswan. In an effort to throw off the yoke of familial subjection and bondage, Dina rejects her brother’s repeated attempts to find her another husband and strives to make ends meet as a seamstress in a rented flat in Bombay. To help improve her economic situation, she lets a room to Maneck Kohlah, an unusually sensitive and reluctant student of engineering who, though estranged from his own parents, feels obliged to tailor his life according to their expectations for fear of disappointing them.

‘Money’ is, therefore, the sole principle that connects these four unlikely characters and brings them together in Dina Dalal’s rented Bombay flat. Divided by religion, caste, class, and gender, they regard one another with suspicion and distrust and are ever vigilant in safeguarding their individual interests from the necessarily exploitative relations that unite them. Om, more savvy and conscious of his rights than his timid and unquestioning uncle, resents Dina’s intermediary position which prevents the tailors from dealing directly with the textile company for whom they do “piece work.” Dina, who provides them with the equipment and materials necessary for the production of garments, thus facilitates, to borrow a phrase from Marx, capitalism’s alienation of labor from the means of production. To this end and to ensure her own survival in the game, she must keep the identity and whereabouts of “Au Revoir Exports” hidden.
from her employees (Mistry 89). Dina panics every time her tailors are late for work assuming that they have deserted her for better paying jobs elsewhere while Om tries to find ways of eliminating her entirely so that they can sew directly for the export company. Pawns in an economic system that preserves its own hegemony by fostering anxiety, insecurity and competition between individuals, the three characters spend their days trying to outwit one another for minimal gain even as larger structures of oppression remain firmly in place.

However, as state tyranny grows and the Emergency regime, welcomed at first for its ostensible commitment to radical reform, shows evidence of having forsaken the poor in favor of big business interests, the characters become aware of their social interdependence. The novel presents a vivid and horrific commentary on Sanjay Gandhi’s slum clearance and city beautification schemes that led to mass dispossession and misery among the working poor. While, on the one hand, Om and Ishwar return from work to discover that their slum has fallen to police bulldozers and that they no longer have a roof over their heads, on the other, the already lonely and depressed Maneck Kohlah loses his only friend Avinash to the ‘JP Movement’ and watches helplessly as the intelligent and passionate young man first disappears mysteriously and is subsequently reported to have been murdered by the ruling regime. As the streets and other ‘public’ spaces are rendered off-limits for the urban poor, Dina, responsible for providing her tailors with the means of subsistence necessary to ensure their labor-power, has no choice but to take them into her home. The ‘flat’ (property) provides safety and protection from the violent and volatile world outside and becomes a significant marker of legitimacy, of the right to privacy and citizenship, privileges that Om and Ishwar are denied in the slum. However, Dina’s own position is far from secure for as Ibrahim, the rent collector, constantly reminds her on his visits, she does not ‘own’ the flat and therefore lives under the permanent risk of eviction.
Abandoned by an authoritarian and self-serving state and denied support, for different reasons, by their non-existent or dysfunctional families, the four characters find themselves bereft of any rights or appeals for justice. Buffeted by the ever-fluctuating designs of a rapidly globalizing economy, they gradually succeed in overcoming the boundaries of class and religious affiliation rigidly adhered to at first and band together for mutual support and sustenance. As times grow worse, Dina finds herself helping out in the work and even teaching Maneck to sew in order that deadlines be met and she and the tailors continue to receive the contracts they so desperately need to stay afloat. As Om and Maneck bond over their mutual attraction for girls and movies, Dina and Ishwar, cautious at first, also find themselves crossing the barriers of class to share with each other their pasts and their dreams for the future.

In making visible, through the personal histories of these four characters, the erasures of caste, class, gender, and religion at work in the construction of the myths of both the bourgeois family and the unified nation, Mistry, it seems to me, alludes to the possibility of new, alternative constructions of community born at the site of production. In other words, ‘work’ rather than religion, language, caste or normative heterosexuality provides a potential locus for imagining a secular and democratized civil society/public sphere where the ‘private’ interest of individual members may be transcended in favor of ‘public’ good. The novel emphasizes the possibilities of collective mobilization around shared working conditions and interests without romanticizing work as an end in itself or denying the hierarchies and oppressions that characterize the workplace. Labor and the struggles surrounding livelihood at the site of modernity thus provide the potential for transforming social relations by disturbing the public/private separation upon which the oppressive (read gendered and sexualized as well as caste/class marked) structure of bourgeois society is built. The echoes from Hegel are unmistakable, but with one crucial
difference.\textsuperscript{32} The ‘state,’ corrupt and violent in this context, has abrogated its social duty and become little more than a handmaiden of ruling class and global financial interests. It must either be transformed and reoriented toward providing minimal freedom and justice to all its citizens or else be altogether dispensed with. In either event, the narrative implies, in my judgment, that modern civil society must first assume a secular and democratic character through collective struggle.

In the course of the seven hundred and fifty odd pages that comprise this account of the Emergency and its aftermath, \textit{A Fine Balance} makes occasional reference to communal tensions in post-independence India. Early in the narrative, we find allusions to post-Partition riots and to the efforts of right wing Hindu forces to break the solidarity between Muslims and Dalits in service to a monolithic Hindu nationalism -- which also employs the rhetoric of the heteropatriarchal family to efface differences of caste, class and gender -- that fails to take root as bonds between people of different faiths remain unshaken. The lifelong friendship between Ishwar and Ashraf chacha who teaches him and his brother Narayan their trade and whose life the tailors save by hiding him from a murderous Hindu mob during a communal riot testifies to the essentially secular character of civil spaces. Later, we find references to Shiv Sena support to the Emergency regime and to the organization’s designs to communalize the Indian body politic. The ‘epilogue’ to the novel, entitled “1984,” is a direct indictment of Indira Gandhi’s deliberate fostering of communal tendencies in Punjab in the narrow interests of electoral politics. An unsuspecting Maneck returns to India from the Middle East after a gap of eight years to find himself in the middle of another national crisis, produced this time by a brutally calculated, state

\textsuperscript{32} Hegel writes, “In the course of the actual attainment of selfish ends … there is formed a system of complete interdependence, wherein the livelihood, happiness and legal status of one man is interwoven with the livelihood, happiness and rights of all …”(123)
sponsored anti-Sikh pogrom unleashed by supporters of the recently assassinated prime minister on an entire community accused of anti-national conspiracy. The Sikh cab driver who informs Maneck of the massacres in the capital and elsewhere in the country, like all the ‘ordinary’ men and women in the novel, affirms his secular credentials by claiming that communalism is little more than “elite conspiracy,”33 the result of strategic political manipulation by leaders to garner support for their electoral ambitions and deflect attention from the ‘real’ issues of injustice and inequality that plague society: “The real murderers will never be punished. For votes and power they play with human lives. Today it is Sikhs. Last year, it was Muslims; before that, Harijans. One day, your sudra and kusti may not be enough to protect you” (Mistry 712).

If, as the novel appears to suggest, the state is a repository of bourgeois and communal interests, the onus of social and political transformation falls on the “non-possessing classes” (Desai 35) i.e., lower castes and the poor, whose investment in equality and redistributive justice singles them out as potential harbingers of change. The middle class Maneck’s suicide acts as a foil to the tailors’ strength and fortitude that compels them to persist despite their repeated subjection to state and caste violence, social engineering in the form of vasectomy, and reduction to utter abjectness and destitution. Yet, as small time crooks like Beggarmen and Rajaram use their cunning to profit from the regime’s excesses, Ashraf chacha and the tailors are completely destroyed. Ultimately then, the novel proffers a tragic vision as articulation of alternative forms or modes of struggle by its characters is largely foreclosed due to their social and political marginalization. However, the tailors come to embody the dignity and decency of the individual human spirit that endures against the fiercest odds and refuses to succumb to hopelessness and absurdity. Their dreams of betterment permanently shattered by the brutal machinations of an

33 I take the term “elite conspiracy” from Amrita Basu’s essay entitled “Mass Movement or Elite Conspiracy? The Puzzle of Hindu Nationalism.”
iniquitous order, Ishwar and Om take to begging in the streets outside Dina’s brother’s apartment. For Maneck, the most privileged of the four characters, their life provides the final lesson in futility and strengthens his resolve to end his life:

One sat slumped on a low platform that moved on castors. He had no legs. The other pulled the platform with a rope slung over his shoulder…. The legless beggar coughed and spat. Maneck glanced at the gob; it was tinged with blood … Wait, he wanted to call out – wait for me ….He did nothing ….He could hear the castors clattering briefly over the uneven stones. The sound died; he continued on his way. (Mistry 744)

The closing image of the novel finds the pair making light of their own wretchedness as they thank their compassionate hostess for a stolen evening meal and prepare to return to the cold pavement for the night. Their exuberance bears testimony to their naiveté and only reinforces, for the reader, the sheer pathos of their situation. The complicity of the middle class narrator and reader in their shared access to superior knowledge heightens, by contrast, the tailors’ incomprehension and inability to recognize, much less accept, their own reality. The deliberate disjuncture thus produced, in the text, between ‘knower’ and ‘known’ confounds the activist agenda of the earlier pages and culminates in an objectification and romanticization (read ‘othering’) of Dalit and working class existence.

In an influential essay on Indian writing in English, critic Meenakshi Mukherjee identifies a crucial difference in content and approach between expatriate writers of Indian origin and the so-called bhasha novelist who lives and works and whose audience is located in India. She argues that, implicit in the writings of the “Third World Cosmopolitans” like Rushdie and Mistry is a persistent preoccupation with the idea of “Indianness.” Evident in their use of English and such broad themes and metaphors as colonialism and postcolonialism is their homogenization of linguistic and cultural specificity toward forging a pan-Indian reality in service to a national and/or international market (Mukherjee 179). Mukherjee contrasts this tendency with what she perceives to be the more diverse, amorphous, yet specific and localized concerns and figurations
of reality in the fiction of the regional language writer. Mukherjee’s meticulously reasoned problematic offers a ready analytical prism for the literary interventions of Mistry and Vijayan. However, not only does my reading of Vijayan in English translation makes it difficult to embrace the global-local binary that her model inscribes, I also suspect that its unspoken valorization of the local renders her framework somewhat restrictive. In analyzing both novels as complex enactments of a national crisis permeated by specific historical, idiomatic, formal and thematic inscriptions of individuals and communities, I have sought to undo the absolute critical divide between the English and bhasha text. And, in reading these literary interventions as constituted by and constituting a creative tension between “Utopian gratification” and “ideological manipulation” (Jameson 288), I have sought to make visible their distinct negotiations of class, caste and gender difference in their narrative production of history.

Conclusion

The Emergency, as Kaviraj notes and contemporary political formations and alliances testify, inadvertently established both the strengths and weaknesses of Indian democracy (“Indira Gandhi” 1703). As corruption, inflation, unemployment, uneven regional development and the arbitrary nature of bureaucratic procedure made it plain to the people that the gains of the regime were insignificant compared to the atrocities it had perpetrated in the name of radical reform, and the ruling bourgeois coalition began to fall apart, Indira Gandhi had no choice but to call elections. The JP coalition comprising the right wing Hindu Jana Sangh and its affiliates; a newly formed political alliance of the rural rich alienated by Congress policies, the Lok Dal; the Socialist Party and the CPI(M); and the Punjab based Akali Dal achieved a resounding victory in the 1977 elections. Despite the coalition’s instability and internal divisions and its inability to redress the grievances of the vast majority of India’s electorate by providing an alternative structure of governance, the Emergency resulted in the decline of the Congress, centralization of
the state apparatus and the upsurge of political assertion by hitherto marginalized and discredited
groups as diverse in ideology and intent as Dalits, women and the Hindu right. In subsequent
chapters, I seek to examine how each of these identities and formations has come to be mobilized
in relation to the bourgeois state, the ways in which they variously augment, interrupt and
reconfigure received notions of secular democracy and universal citizenship, and the
interpretative strategies employed by individual writers in their explorations of the changing
configurations and relationship of the nation-space -- territorial and ideological -- and the body
politic.
CHAPTER 3
NEGOTIATING COMMUNALIZED SPACES: PERFORMING TRADITIONS

Introduction

In his introduction to Writing Social History, historian Sumit Sarkar acknowledges the failure of the left-liberal intelligentsia, in the aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya (1992), to comprehend, much less to resist, the cultural hegemony achieved by the Hindu Right in conducting a successful, nation-wide hate campaign against Muslims. He points out that populist RSS pamphlets like Ramjanmabhumi ka Rakht-ranjita Itihas or ‘The Bloody History of the Birthplace of Ram’ had far more impact on public opinion than the painstakingly researched and impeccably documented histories produced by eminent scholars belonging to one of India’s premier institutions (Sarkar 2).34 Sarkar rightly cautions against making hasty judgments based on essentialist binarisms between secular/modern elites and religious/traditional masses. However, he himself does not directly address this phenomenon in his book. His point is nevertheless well taken. The task of reclaiming communalized spaces cannot avoid engagement with the cultural dimensions of Hindutva’s hegemonic campaign. It is in this context that ‘tradition,’ in its multiple manifestations, as a process, a “resource” and a rhetorical devise deployed variously by communalist formations and their opponents, forms the focus of my critique in the pages that follow (Alam 19).

Ironically, though not entirely surprisingly, Sarkar’s writings on the Swadeshi movement form the primary locus of fellow historian Dipesh Chakrabarty’s recent allegation that the

---

34 The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh or National Self-Service Organization, is the so-called cultural wing of the Hindu Right. An all male and hyper-masculinist organization that is predominantly upper caste in composition, the RSS has been known to be both anti-Dalit and anti-Muslim. Founded in 1925, its grassroots activism provides young boys with training in physical combat as well as imbuing them with a sense of the greatness of Hindu cultural traditions. Over the years, the RSS has masterminded some of the most violent and bloody campaigns against ‘minorities.’ The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is, in the narrow sense of the term, the ‘political’ wing of the Hindu Right. Most BJP politicians, including former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, first rose to prominence as RSS activists. For more information on the RSS, see Tapan Basu et al, Khaki Shorts, Saffron Flags.
“hyperrationalism” (Habitations 27) of the Indian intellectual inhibits any dialogue with religion except in the binary terms set by Enlightenment thought. He argues that this “secular rationalism” bears an “aggressively hostile attitude toward religion and everything that the practices of Hinduism – whether in the context of kinship, life-cycle rituals, or public life – seemed to sanctify” (25). Even though Chakrabarty does not deal with contemporary communalism *per se*, the observation serves as an admonitory reminder that *Hindutva*’s national hegemony cannot be comprehended, and thereby resisted, unless its cultural coordinates are also examined. Treating communalism solely as a politics that (mis)uses primordial religious identities eclipses its constant reshaping of ‘tradition’ and integration of dissidence in search of new definitions of religio-political community. In order to mount a successful defense against this majoritarian force, therefore, ‘secular’ discourse must find tools for analyzing the cultural semiotics of communalism. Integral to this task is an awareness that Hindu nationalist hegemony is achieved through a constant reshaping of religious, cultural and political sensibilities, deployment of narrative symbolism, performance, and iconography and a flattening out of internal conflicts and differences through the projection of an “imagined community” (Anderson 12).

Important and timely as Chakrabarty’s critique is, it does pose some practical difficulties. Does ‘secular’ discourse that attempts to meet contemporary communalism on its own turf – inflected by the narratives of religion, tradition, and community -- run the risk of cooptation? Can a reconceptualization of ‘tradition’ really serve as a critical resource for combating the monolithic imaginings of Hindutva? What terms must such an enterprise set itself? By way of addressing some of these questions, I subject to analysis, three distinct dramatic reconfigurations of ‘tradition’ that seek to challenge Hindutva’s monopolistic definitions, and its propensity to
conflate religion with culture. For, as I mentioned earlier, the Hindu Right’s ideological campaigns use symbols, stories, images, myths, and tropes in order to construct its particular vision of nationalism – rhetorical and performative techniques that we would ordinarily associate with literary texts rather than with what we conventionally understand as disciplinary history. In fact, literature, specifically Hindi literature, has been successfully pressed into the service of Hindutva campaigns, especially through widespread pedagogical initiatives. I therefore maintain that the literary could provide us with some useful tools for decoding, deconstructing and reconfiguring the ‘truth claims’ of majoritarian cultural nationalism. Moreover, in recognizing its self-validating and “socially present” (Alam 23-4) character, the plays unsettle liberal assumptions of total autonomy in relation to tradition(s) that theorists like Nandy and Chakrabarty also refute. At the same time, their performative and utopian imperatives offer the space for examining the multiplicity of public discourses that variously produce, contest, structure and reorder the ways we understand the world and our ‘past,’ toward envisioning possibilities for the constitution of an alternative secular imaginary. Mahesh Dattani’s musings on the deeply ambivalent relation between history, memory, and identity in the context of Partition in Final Solutions (1993); Girish Karnad’s interpretation of an abortive social revolution in twelfth-century Karnataka in Tale Danda (1989); and Kannada playwright H.S. Shiva Prakash’s controversial treatment of the same ‘event’ in Mahachaitra (1993) critically engage, albeit in very different idioms, with the simultaneous presentness and constructedness of ‘tradition’ as it variously intrudes on, inflects, and serves to legitimate our everyday beliefs and practices.

Is there a Secular Muslim in India?

This section concerns the ‘problem’ of ‘Muslim’ identity in postcolonial India and the ways in which the ‘past’ is sought to be preserved through continuity in the present, in part,
through articulations of identity and citizenship via the binary grid of majority and minority.

“Can a Muslim be an Indian?” queries Gyandendra Pandey in a recent article (“Can a Muslim” 608). My reading of Mahesh Dattani’s 1993 play Final Solutions, while exploring the implications of Pandey’s critique, adds the following codicil, ‘What does it mean to be a secular Muslim in India?’

Dattani is arguably the most well known of a small breed of contemporary playwrights in India who write in English. Unlike other languages that have fairly varied theatrical traditions with performances that range from ritual and classical forms to folk, pedagogical and street theater, and multiple combinations thereof, there has yet to be an organized professional theater in English. While translation from other Indian languages into English to reach a wider national and/or international audience is common enough, plays are seldom originally composed in English. The few that are performed are either tedious adaptations of a narrowly conceived American or European canon or drawing room comedies that aim for no more than a few laughs and casual entertainment. This is not entirely surprising in view of the fact that the audience for theater in English is limited to the metropolitan elite who constitute less than four percent of the population. However, in a country of over a billion people, this is by no means an insignificant group, either numerically or in terms of access to and control over resources. In this context, Dattani has the distinction of being the first dramaturge to produce historically informed and socially engaged theater in English for an urban, middle class audience. Primarily centered on the semiotics of the bourgeois ‘family,’ his plays enact and unmask its complex interfaces with issues of communalism, consumerism, gender and sexuality.

Final Solutions opens in an atmosphere charged with the threat of impending violence as a communal riot explodes on an urban street in contemporary India. As murderous mobs shout
anti-Muslim slogans, the scene shifts to the interiors of a middle class Hindu household in the late nineteen forties. Daksha, a fifteen year old bride, reads from her diary, “… I am just a young girl who does not matter to anyone outside her home. Maybe I should talk about more important things. Like last year, in August, a most terrible thing happened to our country. We … gained independence” (Dattani 166). Past and present, public and private, political and personal, outside and inside collide and merge as Daksha, now Hardika, a bitter old woman, moves us through her adult life in post-Partition India and acknowledges with some regret that “things have not changed that much” (167). The violence and carnage that she associates, in her mind, with independence are played out visually on the street in front of the house where two young men, Javed and Babban, are being pursued by a mob hungry for revenge. Daksha/Hardika covers her ears as if to shut out a painful memory as repeated knocking on the front door indicates desperate appeals for sanctuary. As the Gandhi family hesitates and the cries of the two men grow more urgent, Hardika tries to stop her son Ramnik from opening the door by reminding him that it is people such as ‘them’ (the two men) who killed her father all those years ago.

What is interesting about these opening scenes is their effective deconstruction of the absolute separation between ‘faith’ and ‘ideology,’ between the supposedly plural and tolerant lived experiences/traditions of ordinary people (in this case, the middle class Gandhi family) and the machinations of modern statecraft (the mob) that communitarian theorists like Ashis Nandy celebrate (“Politics” 321-344). In fact, Dattani goes to some lengths to emphasize that religious piety and uncritical allegiance to community (founded on adherence to custom and tradition which are themselves neither fixed nor homogeneous) and communal hatred, though not synonymous, are certainly not mutually exclusive. It is, therefore, futile, even dangerous in the present context, to posit a pure epistemology of ‘faith’ (embedded in indigenous traditions) that
is not intertwined in complex ways with ‘modern’ ‘ideologies’ like secularism and communalism.

His stage directions about the function and representation of the Chorus/Mob with which the play opens, confirm another crucial relation, viz., between rioters hired by political factions to ‘communalize’ the public, and average citizens:

_The Mob/Chorus comprises five men and ten masks on sticks. The masks are strewn all over the ramp. The player ‘wears’ a mask by holding the stick in front of him. At more dynamic moments, he can use it as a weapon in a stylized fashion. There are five Hindu masks and five Muslim masks. But when referred to individually, they remain Chorus 1, Chorus 2, etc._ (Dattani 165).

And, following Daksha/Hardika’s narration from the pages of her diary: “The drumbeat grows louder and the Mob/Chorus slowly wear the Hindu masks. Once they are behind the masks, they become more frenetic” (167-8). As the scene progresses, what began as a Chorus of diverse tones, some cautious but registering doubt, of ordinary people becomes increasingly univocal, insistent, repetitive, and violent. As the more moderate, skeptical and questioning voices are drowned, the Chorus becomes a Mob. The two are not identical but, as the stage directions indicate, the former is circumstantially disposed to morph into the latter.

The play also emphasizes that ‘community’ can sometimes be as coercive, intolerant of dissent and prone to rejecting more fluid and unstable definitions of identity in favor of homogeneous categories as are the mechanisms and protocols of governmentality. That Javed and Babban are marked as ‘different’ by their appearance and called upon by Hindu fundamentalists to explain what they are doing in that part of town testifies to the increasing ‘racism’ as well as territorial segregation and aggression that characterize Hindu-Muslim relations in India. Further, it is proof that, for the ‘Muslim,’ safety is entirely provisional for there is no saying when the atmosphere will turn hostile, when access to space and freedom of movement -- the basic right of every citizen -- will shrink beyond recourse and fear, vulnerability
and extreme isolation become the sole reality. The mob also demands that Ramnik make his stand clear. Faced with the stark decision of either expressing his solidarity with his “own people” (Dattani 181) by sacrificing the two men or being labeled “traitor, not one of us” (182) and putting himself and his family in danger, Ramnik’s dilemma destabilizes both liberal notions of individual choice and makes visible the limitations of positing ‘community’ as a democratic substitute for the homogenizing imperatives of the state.

The reluctant admission, into the Gandhi household, of the two Muslim youths sets the stage, initially for confrontation, and gradually for dialogue between the two antagonistic factions. Ramnik, who prides himself on his liberal values, strives to mediate between his openly hostile mother and wife Aruna, on the one hand, and the two men whose gratitude to the family rapidly turns to resentment as they are made conscious of their ‘minority’ status. The Hindu mob’s cries of “This is not their land … their hearts belong there [Pakistan]. But they live on our land” (176) are complemented by Aruna’s patronizing claim that the men have no right to criticize those who have given them protection (190). When they attempt to defend themselves, Ramnik who has thus far been a champion for “civilized” behavior, expostulates, “How dare you suddenly join forces? In my house” (184)?

The few hours spent in enforced proximity expose not only the stereotypes that have, since Partition, informed the two communities’ understanding of each other; they also make visible the fault lines within apparently united families and religious communities leading to more nuanced and inflected conceptualizations of identity formation. Just as Javed and Babban resent being “clubbed together,” (185) Aruna takes exception to Javed’s suggestion that the Gandhi family have anything in common with the mob. “He thinks we are all the same,” (183) she accuses even
as Ramnik is sufficiently provoked by the situation to declare that the men have violence bred in them, that their minds, their lives and their faith is based on violence (198).

By tracing the genealogy of Hindu-Muslim relations in India since Independence/Partition, the play unmasks the majoritarian privilege that underlies protestations of liberal and secular principles. Ramnik, the upper caste, Hindu male, the unmarked and unhyphenated (read ‘natural’) citizen, enjoys the sole right/advantage of autonomous self-definition (Pandey, “Can a Muslim” 608). The protectionism that characterizes his attitude to the two young men echoes larger political and cultural responses to the presence of Muslims in India since 1947. As several scholars have pointed out, India sought to underscore its secular credentials (as opposed to the Islamic ones proclaimed by the Muslim League during the creation of Pakistan) by allowing Muslims the freedom to ‘choose’ where they wanted to live after Partition. However, once the choice of nation was made, it was irreversible. Moreover, the Muslims who chose to stay in India were/are constantly regarded with suspicion, subject to surveillance and continually expected by the ‘majority’ to ‘prove’ their loyalty and gratitude to the nation that they had ‘chosen’ to call home. As he offers the men a glass of milk from his kitchen, Ramnik’s pompous assertion that “peace” is ultimately to be found “hidden in the armpits of the majority” (Dattani 191), lays bare the deep gulf that divides the three individuals. “It must feel good … being the majority,” Javed retorts angrily while Babban intervenes to placate their host, “… it is in your every move … You

35 Gyandendra Pandey makes the interesting point that while ‘minorities’ in India were assigned hyphenated identities like Indian Muslim and Indian Christian by the state, Hindus were assumed to be ‘natural’ citizens. The term Indian Hindu does not exist. See “Can a Muslim?” 608.

36 The question of ‘Muslim’ loyalty is a recurrent theme particularly in the context of Indo-Pak relations. Be it a cricket match or skirmishes along the border between the two countries, the loyalty of Indian Muslims is always viewed as suspect. In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 tragedy in the U.S., Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi is reported as having said on national television in India, “All Muslims are not terrorists but all terrorists are Muslim.” Shortly afterwards in the spring of 2002, riding on the anti-Islamic mood in the western world, he organized and legitimated the genocide against Muslims in the state.
can offer milk to us. You can have an angry mob outside your house. You can play the civilized host. Because you know you have peace hidden inside your armpit” (192).

Muslim identity in the play, on the other hand, is constituted purely as a reaction to and in defense of a Hindu majoritarian ethic masquerading as liberal and secular. Dattani implies that the persistent rhetoric of majority and minority presents Muslims in India with two choices. They can either reject their religious identity in the name of secular modernity or embrace it and be ‘othered’ as fundamentalist and backward. According to this logic, there can no space within Islam for an articulation of the secular. In fact, assertion of religious identity by Muslims, as Javed’s predicament demonstrates, is frequently construed as an instance of self-othering and refusal to assimilate and becomes the legitimation for discrimination and subordinate status.

The play examines the cultural homogenization and demonization of the Indian Muslim by exploring the complex dynamics of identity construction of the two characters Javed and Babban. While the former reacts to Hindu hegemony by vigorously and violently asserting his so-called Islamic “inheritance” (214) as a mobster and street thug, Babban resorts to disidentification with community by calling himself Bobby and ‘passing’ for a non-Muslim. Either way, their survival strategies are ultimately structured by an insidious dynamics of othering that marks them as permanent ‘minorities’ whose rights to citizenship and cultural autonomy are governed by the will of an unchanging ‘majority.’37

**Gender and Community**

However, ‘community’ cannot be theorized in terms that are gender neutral for, in fact, gender and community are mutually constitutive. Even though the play projects men as ‘constituting’ communities, it is through the social and sexual control of women in the name of

---

37 If the vigor of a democracy depends on the absence of permanent majorities, the crisis of Muslim identity in India since Independence testifies to the paucity of our version.
custom and tradition that community identities are crystallized. It is therefore significant that one of the first signs, in the play, of the outbreak of communal tensions takes the form of a rumor that Hindu fundamentalists have bombed a Muslim girls’ hostel. This single fact spirals the audience into a complex and barely repressed narrative of treachery and guilt that, we learn, has structured the lives and choices of the Gandhis since Partition. Ramnik’s teenage daughter Smita’s inadvertent betrayal of her friend Tasneem’s confidence by her disclosure of a family secret in the present recalls Hardika’s disloyalty to Zarine and her destitute family in the immediate aftermath of Partition. Eventually Zarine and Tasneem (past and present) blur and become a continuum in the old woman’s fuzzy brain – a testimony to the depth of her own anger and sense of loss. As the plot unfolds, we realize that Hardika’s husband and in-laws deliberately set out to destroy Zarine’s family by first setting fire to their shop and then buying it at half-price. Ramnik, burdened by guilt and determined to atone for the crimes of his predecessors, accuses his mother of a selective memory for blaming Zarine for the greed of her own marital family and her subsequent loss of status within it. Hardika’s refrain throughout the play remains, “I cannot forget” (Dattani 223) … “I remain confined” (225).

Hardika’s situation bears testimony to the fact that nationalist discourse/historiography never attempted to understand Partition as integral to the constitution of the Indian nation. Its relegation to the status of an aberration, a momentary glitch in what was presumed to be an otherwise forward looking nationalist narrative inhibited dialogue and understanding of what had really happened between people and their communities. The play also suggests that the ‘past’ does not have an objective or uniform character, as is assumed in statist and communal accounts, but is remembered in deeply personalized, contradictory, fragmented, even fictionalized forms. Frequently, as Urvashi Butalia convincingly argues in her pathbreaking work on Partition, it is
how survivors remember that is more worthy of investigation that the ‘truth’ claims implicit in what they remember. The incident also makes the important point that communalism frequently derives from material competition between groups that perceive their interests to be mutually antagonistic and has little to do with religion per se. Curiously though, the two Muslim girls, Zarine and Tasneem, around whose ‘silence’ the plot itself is constructed remain at the level of shadowy figures in the narratives of others. Whether conscious or not, the device brilliantly reinforces the subaltern status of the Muslim woman in the discourse of Indian nationalism. She is simply not there.

However, it is through the ideological conflicts between Hardika’s daughter-in-law and granddaughter that the play reaches its finale. The presence, in the house, of the two Muslim boys precipitates a long awaited confrontation between Aruna, whose patriarchal dreams for her daughter Smita are spurned by the young woman who disregards her “inheritance” (214) in favor of the freedom to choose. That the women have more in common with the two strangers than with each other becomes apparent when Javed comments to Aruna, “What I told Babban, you told her … you said you wouldn’t listen to her criticism because she was not proud of her … inheritance. I said religion. Same thing I suppose. We are not very different. You and me. We both feel pride.” (214). Like Bobby, Smita rejects the burden of tradition and custom reveling in the knowledge that, unlike in her grandmother’s day, the “choice is [hers] to make” (218).

Smita’s valorization of the liberal rhetoric of individual choice as a counter to the coercive identities imposed by ‘community’ appears, at first, to militate against my reading of the play as a critique of certain forms of liberalism. I am inclined to interpret this apparent contradiction as a symptom of the impasse faced by feminist discourse in India when confronted by the narrative of community. Uncritical valorization of community identities elides the fact that they are
frequently oppressive to women while unilateral rejection in favor of a liberal discourse of individual rights can simply reinforce the ethic of the majority, a problematic that I explore further in the fifth chapter.

However, it is Bobby the humanist, who sums up the play’s vision, “The tragedy is that there is too much that is sacred. But if we understand and believe in one another, nothing can be destroyed. And if you are willing to forget, I am willing to tolerate” (225). In order that our ‘final solutions’ do not replicate the dreadful injustices of Nazism, the ‘past’ must be subjected to an ongoing process of critical interrogation, aimed at redress and understanding, rather than simply denounced or repressed. The (im)possible, yet relentless, effort at navigation in search of new beginnings entails inter- and intra- community dialogue so that we may delve into our individual and collective consciousness to remember but only in order that we can, as a society, also create the means and the space for reconciliation and renewal.

**Theorizing the ‘Past’**

Furthermore, the confrontation between Aruna and Smita foregrounds their very different attitudes to the ‘past.’ “You cannot criticize what you are running away from. You will be prejudiced” Aruna admonishes and her daughter responds, “Maybe I am prejudiced because I don’t belong. But not belonging makes things so clear” (211). I cite a portion of the exchange here as a precursor to my discussion of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s critique of what he terms a “revolutionary” or modernist approach to the past that seeks to “bring (a particular) history to nullity in order to build society from scratch” (Habitations 9). Chakrabarty opposes this position in order to endorse, albeit with modification, Ashis Nandy’s “critical traditionalism” that “is respectful to the past without being bound by it” (39).

Chakrabarty points out that liberal and Marxist approaches to the past are either “about a completely willful rejection” or “about viewing history as a dialectical overcoming of the past”
In his view, such positions are predicated on the assumption of “complete transparency of the object of investigation” as well as of the objectivity of the investigating subject. Nandy’s schema, on the other hand, in choosing “wisdom” over an “alienating” scientific rationalism is one with the pulse of popular belief and practice. However, Chakrabarty acknowledges, via his allusions to Nandy’s controversial writings on the Roop Kanwar incident, that sati marks the limit case for “critical traditionalism” in forcing it to confront the question, “Is a practice worthy of respect simply because it is popular?” If not and one must ‘choose’ which traditions are worthy of respect, how different is this “decisionist” stance from modernist approaches? Chakrabarty’s critique of Nandy derives from this dilemma. He argues that because the ultimate goal of Nandy’s theoretical interventions is social justice, his “critical traditionalism” cannot escape the pitfalls of a “decisionist” disposition that “allows him to talk about the future and the past as though they were concrete, value-laden choices or decisions to be made with regard to both” (39). Chakrabarty himself can work his way out of this impasse only by entirely side-stepping the issue of social justice. Curiously enough, he does so first by resorting to a politics of location and then by making a distinction between theory and practice:

Here, I am deliberately avoiding Nandy’s more practical formulation of the question, What does one do? And asking instead, How does one think? Doers will have to answer their questions practically, in terms of the specific historical opportunities available to them …my location in the United States makes it pretentious for me to consider the practical

---

38 A shocking case of widow immolation in 1987 sparked off immense controversy in India. While feminists campaigned for a unilateral ban on ‘sati’ and called on the government to punish those who had perpetrated the incident, Hindu revivalists heralded it as a demonstration of cultural superiority and piety. In an article on the subject, Ashis Nandy, while condemning the actual case, attempted to distinguish between ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ satis in terms of what he called the ‘event’ (ghatana) and the ‘system’ (pratha). The piece came under severe attack from feminists who accused him of condoning the practice and of obfuscating the gendered exploitation it undoubtedly represents. For Nandy’s own account of the controversy, see “Sati in Kali Yuga” in The Savage Freud and Other Essays on Possible and Retrievable Selves (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1995). When I first started to write this chapter in early 2004, a special court in Rajasthan, appointed by the Supreme Court of India, pronounced its final verdict on the case, acquitting all those charged with the euphemistically labeled crime of “glorifying sati” that led to the ‘murder’ of Roop Kanwar. The verdict resulted in nationwide protests by various activist groups who interpreted it as sign of the state’s lack of commitment to women’s rights. They demanded that an appeal for re-trial, by a higher court, be filed immediately.
question. But as an academic-intellectual from India, I can join Nandy and his colleagues in the shared project of thinking about India (45).

In the comforting “darkness”39 of ‘theory’ that does not need to engage with the messy universe of “practical, policy related questions” (44), Chakrabarty strikes a cautionary note against what he terms a modernist overstatement of our “autonomy” (47) in relation to the past. He concludes that we are molded in the hands of pasts and traditions that haunt and speak through us in ways that we cannot comprehend. Our only choice, therefore, is to recognize and accept the limitations of rational thought.

Even though I concede that Chakrabarty’s rigorous deconstructivist critique of post-Enlightenment rationalism is instructive, the Indian intellectual cannot afford the complacency of dissociating the practical from the theoretical particularly at a historical moment when the political and cultural landscape remain vulnerable to transformation through the invention and invocation of an ‘authentic’ Hindu tradition conceived in monolithic terms. Until recently, history books were being rewritten and the ‘past’ reconfigured in accordance with certain preferred goals. Violence against minorities has become the order of the day. How can we contest majoritarian definitions of the past if we have no choice but to critically surrender to it? Can ‘tradition’ be redefined only from within its own parameters, i.e., through a process of internal critique? If so, how does such an enterprise serve the interests of an anti-communal agenda? More importantly, Chakrabarty’s analysis does not subject ‘tradition’ itself to any historicization, treating it as both self-evident and beyond the pale of analysis. As in Nandy, such a position could easily translate into an implicit endorsement of dominant (read brahmanical and capitalist) hierarchies and privilege. It is against this background and in search of alternative

39 Chakrabarty uses the word “dark” in its literal sense as ‘that through which light cannot pass.’ His point is that ‘theory’ cannot illuminate everything for there are aspects of society that remain “opaque to the theoretical gaze of the modern analyst” (45). The critic must, therefore, approach ‘tradition’ not only with respect but also “fear and anxiety” (46) and an acceptance that we can never ‘know’ for certain.
understandings of the past as a means to resisting the hegemonic figurations of Hindutva that the two Kannada playwrights Girish Karnad and H. S. Shiva Prakash offer their dramatic interventions. Before proceeding to examine their interpretations of the Basava ‘tradition,’ I offer a brief historical account of its major elements in an attempt to demonstrate why it carries such resonance for secular cultural activism in our times.40

**Basava and the Virashaiva Movement**

In her recent study of the hagiography of twelfth century religious movements in what, today, is the southern Indian state of Karnataka, Julia Leslie identifies Virashaivism as emerging in direct opposition to Brahmin orthodoxy. She points out that this new form of bhakti condemned Vaishnavism, the contemporary manifestation of caste Hinduism,41 for its social injustices, its emphasis on purity and ritual as means of achieving the divine, its valorization of scriptural Sanskrit over Kannada, and its polytheistic principles. The origins of the movement itself are believed to have preceded Basaveshwara, a Brahmin by birth, by several centuries but he is considered to be its most important leader and philosopher. In contrast to the Vishnu worshipping Vaishnava brahmins, Virashaivas [literally, heroic or militant devotees of Shiva] posited service and self-knowledge (rather than temple worship or ritual negotiation by priests) as routes to salvation and sought to establish an egalitarian social order by rejecting all hierarchies, including those of gender and caste. Basava’s most important message to his

---

40 Githa Hariharan’s most recent novel *In Times of Siege* (2003) addresses issues of academic freedom and intellectual integrity in the communalized climate of contemporary India. The central character, Shiv, is a Delhi based university professor of history who comes under severe attack from right wing Hindu forces for his interpretation of Basava’s life in an undergraduate course ‘module’ written several years earlier. Echoes of recent controversies over the rewriting of history textbooks published by the NCERT (National Council for Educational Research and Training) and Shiva Prakash’s play *Mahachaitra* are hard to miss.

41 I use the word ‘Hinduism’ with reference to this period with some reservation because the monolithic term/concept is a nineteenth century invention, a product of colonial law and Brahminical social hegemony. Sudipta Kaviraj’s evocative phrase “fuzzy communities” best describes pre-modern affiliations for they were unenumerated, fluid and lacked discrete boundaries. For more information on Kaviraj’s notion, see his “The Imaginary Institution of India.”
sharanas [followers], inscribed in his vacanas [sayings], remained ‘work and service.’ The movement was open and inclusive and consisted, according to A. K. Ramanujan, of two complementary strands, namely those of the sthavara [the ‘stationary’ domestic worshipper] and the jangama [itinerant ascetic] (qtd. in Leslie 235).

Leslie informs us that most commentators tend to read Basava’s life in terms of four important stages of development. However, both Karnad and Shiva Prakash are concerned with the period stretching roughly between his acceptance the post of royal treasurer in the court of the Chalukya king Bijjala around 1162 and his ‘death’ in 1168 following a coup d’etat and a social revolution that culminated in terror and annihilation. It is also worth stressing, at this point, that the dramatists’ engagement with the past operates on two levels. On the one hand, the plays strive to interpret the relevance and relationship of Basava’s socio-political and religious movement to the traditions it sought to critique in its own time. On the other hand, the authors’ understanding of Virashaivism and of the historical period that the plays recreate is structured by the specific ideological predilections of our times. In part, therefore, their use of the ‘past’ is presentist and instrumentalist in that it serves as a function of the present. However, as Karnad notes in his preface to the English translation of Tale Danda, we must return to the past critically and selectively for to ignore its lessons means that we could be doomed to repeat it: “I wrote Tale Danda in 1989 when the ‘Mandir’ and the ‘Mandal’ movements were beginning to show

42 ‘Mandir-Mandal’ refers to two events in India’s recent political history that are regarded as having a causal relation. In 1990, a Left Front government passed a Bill ratifying into law what is known as the Mandal Commission Report which recommended that a certain percentage of seats be reserved for ‘minorities’ (Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) in education and government jobs. This affirmative action policy led to widespread agitation and violence and provoked some of the worst riots in the country. It led to the fall of the V. P. Singh government and generated renewed support for the Hindu Right from those who saw the new policy as threatening upper caste/class hegemony. Partly as a result of this newly discovered rallying cry and partly to deflect attention from the uncomfortable question of caste exploitation within Hinduism that sought to undercut projections of a unified Hindu community, the Right masterminded the demolition, in Ayodhya in December 1992, of an ancient Babri Mosque as a precursor to making good a long term promise of building a Ram ‘Mandir’ (a temple dedicated to Ram) on its ruins.
again how relevant the questions posed by these thinkers were for our age. The horror of subsequent events and the religious fanaticism that has gripped our national life today have only proved how dangerous it is to ignore the solutions they offered.”

**Tale Danda and Mahachaitra: A Reading**

Before I examine these two very distinct interpretations of the *Virashaiva* movement, I would like to stress that the ‘tradition’ remains alive in southern India, in its modern adaptations, in the culture of the Lingayat community. The Lingayats claim descent from Basava’s *sharanas* and the Constitution of India listed them as a category different from ‘Hindu’ in 1950 (Leslie 229). However, today, their relationship to mainstream Hinduism lacks the contestatory force that once defined it. Moreover, current mobilizations by the Hindu Right have sought to co-opt Lingayats within their exclusivist, national paradigms often leading, as I shall briefly demonstrate in my discussion of Shiva Prakash’s *Mahachaitra*, to complex clashes and alliances.

Girish Karnad belongs to the first generation of post-independence playwrights in Kannada who rose to prominence in the nineteen-sixties partly as the result of state patronage of literature and the performing arts. Although multilingual, this former Oxford Rhodes Scholar turned dramaturge and stage, television and film actor characteristically composes his plays in Kannada and then translates them into English (Sengupta 13). Commenting on the persistent challenges before professional theater with the emergence of film and television, Karnad argues that the reason for the failure of the Parsi theater system, the dominant urban theater movement in the thirties, was its conscious avoidance of social concerns in pursuit of “escapist fare” that relied solely on spectacle, music and stage tricks to provide entertainment to an urban, middle class audience (“Theatre” 336). Driven entirely by monetary considerations, it shied from

---

The two events have changed the face of Indian politics and culture in recent years and ‘Mandir’ construction still remains an important item on the ruling B.J.P’s national agenda.
experimentation and improvisation, hallmarks of traditional, folk theater, settling for tested and formulaic performances. Once the film industry began to assume the role of ‘entertainer,’ the Parsi theater edifice simply collapsed. In a semi-autobiographical article on theater in India, written in the period of the television boom of the eighties, Karnad emphasizes that to have any relevance at all, “drama must at some level engage honestly with the contradictions that are at the heart of the society it talks about” (336). Acknowledging, with an element of regret, that the fate of professional theater in India is inextricably linked to the choices of the film and television industries, he echoes the sentiment shared by most people involved in the activity today:

Where does one go from here? … let me say that I shall go on writing plays, theater or no theater, as at least some of my contemporaries will, I know, too. One writes because one has to: the pleasure that one has derived from the theater drives one on. One writes in the hope that one day there will be more of a professional theater on which to stage one’s work. Meanwhile, one makes a living. (349)

_Tale Danda_ (literally, ‘death by beheading’) was written in Kannada, published in 1990, translated into Hindi and performed in Delhi as _Raktakalyan_ (‘bloody Kalyan’) in 1992 by the National School of Drama Repertory Theater and subsequently in other cities around the country. Karnad’s English translation of the play first appeared in 1993, the same year that he received the Karnataka Sahitya Akademi Award (the highest state level award for excellence in literature). In 1994, the play won the national level Sahitya Akademi Award. This was also the year that Shiva Prakash’s play _Mahachaitra_ became embroiled in a major controversy in Karnataka. Alluding to the differences between his craft and Shiva Prakash’s, Karnad emphasizes historical accuracy as his primary concern, “Shiva Prakash’s is more like a poem … _Tale Danda_ is a historical play. It deals with characters in history who set in motion the whole Bhakti movement.

43 It is worth pointing out that globalization in the nineties saw the systematic withdrawal of state subsidies to the performing arts and the ‘parallel’ cinema movement resulting in the demise of the latter and severe crippling of the former. The incursions of cable television on the national imaginary and corporate advertising and control of the media have further exacerbated the already widening gap between ‘entertainment’ and socially informed television and/or theater to which Karnad alludes.
Every episode, every remark is verified” (Sengupta 13). In contrast, Shiva Prakash’s work combines “theatrical idioms which are distinctly Kannada” (vi) with the poetic and metaphysical dimensions of Wole Soyinka’s ritual theater as it attempts, in his own words, to grapple “with the problems and solutions tried by my community over centuries” (vii).

When first published in Kannada, Mahachaitra achieved great critical acclaim and won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1986. In subsequent years, it was performed both within and outside the state and included in several university syllabi. However, in 1994, Right wing Hindu formations affiliated to the Bharatiya Janata Party sought to form electoral alliances with the Lingayat community in the state.44 The play thus came under severe attack from Hindu nationalists and their Lingayat supporters on the grounds of its ostensibly anti-Hindu and (paradoxically) anti-Lingayat underpinnings. The movement calling for a ban on the play was spearheaded by Lingayat leader Jagadguru Mate Mahadevi who accused Shiva Prakash of deliberately misinterpreting Basava’s life, thereby violating the sanctity of the vacanas45 and the basic tenets of the tradition.46 As the protests turned violent, the state was forced to withdraw the text from university classrooms. Interestingly, litterateurs in Karnataka defended Shiva Prakash’s right to expression on the grounds that his play should be read as literature, not history (Deccan Herald 4). The indeterminate relationship between the fictive and the historical truth/fact, i.e.,

44 According to the estimates of the first Backward Class Commission of 1975, Lingayats constitute 14.64% of the population of the state of Karnataka. As the dominant community in Northern Karnataka, they have become a major focus of attention of political parties like the Congress, the Janata Dal and, more recently, the BJP during Assembly (state) and Lok Sabha (national) elections. See, for example, article in The Hindu, “Parties vie for the Lingayat Vote.”

45 Literally, ‘sayings’ of Basava around which the history of his life and work and the religious doctrines of the Virashaiva movement are constructed.

46 Ironically, Mate Mahadevi, who was herself involved in compiling Basava’s vacanas at the time that the controversy broke out, was the target of similar attacks for her own work in 1997. Succumbing to pressure from other religious leaders, the Karnataka government banned her book Vacana Deepti on the grounds that it hurt the sentiments of the Virashaiva community.
between the performative and constative functions of literature, was thus invoked to devalue the social and ideological impact of the former and, thereby, to argue for its continued circulation. Since the controversy, the play has been translated into other languages and continues to be performed across the country.

Both playwrights interpret ‘community’ is terms that are ‘modern’ in the sense that twelfth century society, in the plays, is composed of firmly bounded, discrete and non-porous group identities engaged in a perpetual relationship of mutual conflict and antagonism. Allusions to ongoing power struggles between Jains and *Vaishnava* Brahmans; the enumerated and territorial aspect of community identity – Karnad tells us that exactly one hundred and sixty two thousand *sharanas* gathered outside the royal treasury to lend support to Basava; the idea, in Shiva Prakash of a “collective [political] will” (Kaviraj, “Imaginary” 26) that makes demands on the ‘state’ for benefits and privileges; militate against Sudipta Kaviraj’s famous description of pre-modern communities as “fuzzy” i.e., as characterized “by a relative lack of clarity of where one’s community, or even one’s region, ended and another began” (14). Additionally, Karnad’s deployment of the term ‘secular’ to describe Bijjala’s policy of non-interference in matters religious, the king’s clashes with Basava’s egalitarian socio-political vision and its consequences for the city state of Kalyan testify to the fact that the play strives, in part, to read contemporary values into an ancient social reality.

In sharp contrast to prevailing (read brahmanical) notions of community identity as inherited and fixed, Karnad’s Basava upholds individual autonomy, knowledge, born of an awakened ‘consciousness,’ and voluntary association as constituting his new spiritual brotherhood. “To tell any *sharana* what to do would be to insult him,” (Karnad, *Tale Danda* 68) he admonishes, adding that, “for a *sharana*, physical parentage is of no consequence. A person is
born truly only when the guru initiates him into a life of knowledge” (20). Karnad, therefore, reads Basava’s vision as “revolutionary” (Chakrabarty, Habitations 39) a radical departure from the ‘past’ in quest of a truly plural and egalitarian social and moral order. And in interpreting ‘our’ past as constituted by diverse influences and ideologies and therefore open to contestation, he deconstructs its contemporary monolithic manifestations.

However, the ‘past’ is not so easily repudiated. A pratiloma [hypogamous] marriage between a brahmin girl and the son of a leather worker sets the stage, in both plays, for the eruption of inter-community conflict. Karnad presents this moment as simultaneously a victory and a test for Basava’s radical social movement. Taught by their leader to reject caste and ritual purity and to treat all human beings as equal, Basava’s disciples demonstrate their revolutionary zeal by deliberately violating social and scriptural sanction to arrange an alliance between the daughter and son of two sharanas – one, an erstwhile Brahmin and the other, an ‘untouchable.’ The proposal leads to mass social unrest, and threats of violence from outraged upper castes force the king to compromise his own ‘secular’ principles and intercede on behalf of Basava’s people, a decision that has disastrous social and political consequences.

The king’s ‘statist’ intervention to protect ‘minorities’ not only serves to problematize the framework of strict separation (between the state and religion) in contemporary articulations of political secularism, it is also clearly differentiated from his son Sovideva’s subsequent violent and majoritarian order. However, more interesting for purposes of my argument is Karnad’s exploration of Basava’s reaction to the news of the marriage and its implications for current negotiations of ‘tradition.’ The proposition itself is without precedent and carries great symbolic significance in its radical interrogation and disruption of inequality institutionalized through the maintenance and naturalization of caste hierarchy. It represents an unshakable faith in the
possibility of collective action in effecting revolutionary social transformation. Yet, when the concerned parties arrive at Basava’s house to inform him of their decision, he hesitates to give them his blessing:

BASAVANNA: Until now it was only a matter of theoretical speculation. But this – this is real. The orthodox will see this mingling of castes as a blow to the very roots of vanashrama dharma. Bigotry has not faced such a challenge in two thousand years. I need hardly describe what venom will gush out, what hatred will erupt once the news spreads. (Karnad, Tale Danda 38)

Sure enough, news of the marriage sets in motion a relentless chain of violence and retribution. Not only does it come to be regarded as an outrage by upper castes, it causes deep rifts within the sharana fold, confirming Bijjala’s claim that the attachments of caste grow deep and cannot be peeled away at will. At best, the marriage marks a fleeting symbolic victory for the lower castes. However, as Basava fears, its political radicalism is premature for society still remains largely unchanged. The cultural and psychic dimensions of caste and its direct relationship to occupation have yet to be adequately addressed. Haralayya, the father of the groom to be, points out that even though he and his family gave up meat and alcohol along with their ancient gods in order to be accepted into the sharana fold, their professional choices and access to resources remain bound within the dictates of the varna system. “Why … are we still stitching the same old scraps of leather? … If my son decided to change his vocation, will the weavers accept him? Will the potters open their ranks?” (41) he demands of Madhurvarasa the brahmin to whom he will soon be related by marriage. In response, Basava asserts to his disappointed followers, “We are not ready for the kind of revolution this wedding is. We haven’t worked long or hard enough” (44). Contemporary echoes of Mandal and its backlash in the form of renewed and aggressive political and cultural mobilization by the Hindu Right are unmistakable.

Brahmanical hegemony reasserts itself, in the plays, through a complex combination of coercion and consent. The playwrights’ reading of the ‘past’ is aimed at exploding contemporary
majoritarian claims about the inherent catholicity and inclusiveness of Hinduism. The plays emphasize that the Hindu past, sought to be constructed and valorized in monolithic terms by right wing formations as well as some anti-secularist critics in India today, was by no means either tolerant or plural. Organized and sustained violence against ‘minorities’ and dissenters was vital to the constitution of Vedic hegemony. When direct subordination failed, the tradition’s so-called elasticity and accommodation of difference were invoked to justify its logic of deep inequality. In Karnad, Chief priest Damodara Bhatta sums up the ancient tradition as “[A] hierarchy which accommodates difference” [and] is [therefore] more humane than an equality which enforces conformity” (57). The Vishwa Hindu Parishad’s [World Hindu Council] denunciation of political secularism on the grounds that it undermines faith and community autonomy in service to an alienating statist uniformity resonates powerfully in these lines.

However, the two dramatists diverge dramatically in their exploration of religious violence and the efficacy of Basava’s spiritual and social message. Karnad’s Basava alludes to violence as a fundamental aspect of sanatana dharma or mainstream Hinduism and urges his own followers to reject it at all costs. But, individual and community based rivalries and aggression for economic and territorial control within the sharana fold grievously undermine his ‘liberal’ vision, splitting the movement permanently. The order, in Karnad, is thus destroyed by power struggles between lesser individuals who fail to comprehend, much less to follow, the mystic’s radical worldview. Rigid and coercive identities replace Basava’s notion of community as voluntary and faith as based on individual knowledge and experience. As sharana and brahmanical hegemonies clash in the play, the differences in their ideologies are paradoxically rendered irrelevant in the face of the ensuing violence. It is, therefore, significant that Karnad’s description of the sharana army recalls contemporary Hindu fundamentalist spectacles. As the
deposed king watches helplessly from his palace-prison, the murderous *sharana* mob led by Jagadeva emerges on the streets, “All around the temple of Ravana-Siddheswara … *It’s saffron … saffron …*” (75).47 Dissent is entirely subsumed as Vedic orthodoxy, in all its oppressive, communitarian aspects reasserts itself; caste and gender hierarchies are firmly re-established; and free thinkers doggedly pursued and silenced by the new regime. In the final analysis, the play reads like a lament for liberalism as all forms of religious and communitarian mobilization culminate similarly in violence and repression.

However, Karnad’s vision for the secular extends beyond an unequivocal relegation of religion to the private sphere, divorced from the forces of public protocol and modern democratic governance. Even though its conclusion underscores the fact that organized religion can frequently turn violent and repressive, it seems to me that the play is built on a recognition that simple separation from politics is neither tenable not a viable solution to communal conflict. What then is the role of religion in public discourse? Interestingly, Karnad resolves this question by distinguishing between forms of religion, like Basava’s, that are commensurate with modernity and may therefore be allowed into the public sphere and authoritarian manifestations that are repressive, exclusionary, antithetical to free public debate and, therefore, anti-secular. The assumption underlying this position, as Talal Asad has shown in his recent critique of Jose Casanova’s work, is that religion may be “deprivatized” (Asad 182) only if it can be proved to play a positive political role in modern society by its willingness to negotiate space through “rational debate” rather than coercion (182-3). In other words, “only religions that have accepted the assumptions of liberal discourse … in which tolerance is sought on the basis of a distinctive

---

47 Saffron, a sacred color in Hinduism, is commonly associated, in India, with the Hindu Right. ‘Saffronization,’ therefore, is a frequently used synonym for ‘communalization’ by Hindu majoritarian formations.
relation between law and morality” (Asad 183) are worthy of being admitted to the public domain.

In contrast to Karnad’s attempts to configure the relevance of Basava’s teachings for our times, H. S. Shiva Prakash’s reading of the ‘tradition’ is dictated by a rather more radical agenda. His allusions to “the mad saints of Persia” (Mahachaitra 33) for example, draw attention to Sufism as one of many traditions that influenced the sharana struggle and contributed to the eclecticism of its beliefs. Significantly, however, Basava himself does not appear in Shiva Prakash’s play even though the movement that is ascribed to him constitutes its subject matter. Set in the aftermath of the events that led to the king’s dismissal of Basava and his subsequent departure from the city of Kalyan, the opening scenes stage, in ritual form, an ideological battle between two groups of Basava’s followers. Even while they mourn the loss of their leader, the sharanas are forced to envision a future without him. In other words, the emphasis in this play is not on the heroic aspects of Basava’s life or even on his theological and social message but on the continuing struggle of the downtrodden to overcome the stranglehold of brahmanical hegemony. The argument between Chennabasavanna and Machideva, two disciples of Basava, may thus be productively read as a conflict between two approaches to ‘tradition.’ While the former stresses individual dignity, exemplary behavior and non-violence in keeping with the original tenets outlined by his visionary uncle, the latter speaks of retaliatory violence and destruction of brahmanism as the only paths to social transformation. Alluding to Basava’s departure as his abandonment of the cause, Machideva points out that their leader’s teachings must be subjected to constant critique and reinterpretation in accordance with the changing needs of the movement. Regarding any tradition or doctrine as sacrosanct is to risk its reification or worse, appropriation by conservative configurations. “The actor called Basava has left the stage.
The play remains” (47), a character, opines. Individuals come and go and their visions influence collective struggle in diverse ways. What is most important is the struggle itself.

Shiva Prakash’s revolutionary vision locates the search for secularism in the perspective of the minority. In many ways, his position resembles Kancha Ilaiah’s notion of “dalitization” as a form of democracy, a resistance to communalism, and a means of social justice. Like Ilaiah, he defines *sharana/Dalit* identity as shaped, in large part, by productive labor. As the state-brahmanism nexus operates to subjugate ‘lower’ castes and crush their aspirations to political and economic empowerment, Machideva asserts that it is time for the devotees of Shiva to dance the *tandava* once again (Shiva Prakash 48).48 The brutal murder of the despot Bijjala by a group of actors as he performs a *yagna* [ritual sacrifice] takes on metaphorical proportions and the stage is rapidly transformed into an archetypal battleground for the clash of cosmic forces within which the specific experience of the community is, nevertheless, firmly entrenched.

The gruesome spectacle of the assassination with which the action of the play reaches its culmination, expertly combines theatrical devices derived from Shakespearean traditions with more local and ritualistic forms of the *Veeragase*, ascribed to the legend of Veerabhadra. Earlier in the play, an itinerant *sharana* deprecates brahmins as a class by alluding to their “universally known” humiliation by Veerabhadra, a son of Shiva (29). The Puranic story referenced here tells of the proud King Daksha who, with the assistance of innumerable brahmin priests, organized a massive *yagna* to be attended by rulers from kingdoms near and far. Neglecting to honor Shiva with the deliberate intent of undermining his worth, Daksha incurred the famous wrath of the patron of the socially marginalized. Veerabhadra, the son born of Shiva’s ire, avenged the insult

---

48 The *tandava*, a call to war, is attributed to *Shiva*, commonly believed to be the destroyer of evil.
to his father’s person by forcibly entering the sacred site and “chopp[ing] off the head of Daksha and of the brahmin sages” (29). Shiva Prakash’s equation of Bijjala, who unleashes a reign of terror on the laboring poor in order to pay for his own extravagances, with the legendary Daksha, differs significantly from Karnad’s sympathetic portrayal of the king as a barber by caste whose support for Basava’s vision of a casteless society is driven by personal experiences of humiliation and violence. “One’s caste is like the skin on one’s body,” Bijjala explains to his kshatriya [warrior caste] wife Rambhavati in Karnad’s rendering, “You can peel it off top to toe, but when the new skin forms, there you are again: a barber – a shepherd – a scavenger” (Tale Danda 14-15).

In Mahachaitra, the yagna, an explicitly Vedic ritual facilitated by royal plunder, rape and murder of marginalized peoples and their communities, becomes a site for the staged confrontation between two traditions: the Vedic and the non-Vedic. The ritual triumph of the latter is enacted by the murder of Bijjala by a group of actors claiming to be “the ganas of Shiva” as he prepares to begin the sacrifice (61). Interestingly, Chowdaiah the actor who performed the part of the departed Basava in an earlier scene is accorded the ‘role’ of stabbing Bijjala. The literary/dramatic ‘act,’ is thus foregrounded as an event and an interpretation. The actor’s stylized enactment of murder in the course of a frenzied dance produces ‘real’ consequences even as it haunts Machideva’s injunction about the importance of continual redefinition of the objectives and ideals of a movement over fidelity to the memory of its heroes. However, it would be simplistic to conclude that the play uncritically glorifies violence for the murder of the king results in calamitous repercussions for the city, and especially for those perceived, by the inheritors of Bijjala’s legacy, to have been responsible for his death. In my view, violence, in this mythopoeic narrative, is represented as both constitutive and destructive. Following the
holocaust, a few surviving sharanas gather around to introspect on their actions and evaluate their prospects for the future. “So many dead! Blood! Fire! … Was it all necessary?” one worker asks and Machideva replies, “Basavanna, Mahamane, everything … everything was inundated. All that survived was us, people like us” (6). In Mahachaitra, or the great season of spring, the sharanas depart from the ruined city to rebuild elsewhere, to begin anew. Within the cyclical logic of the play, creation must follow destruction and the new order, founded on sharana labor, belongs to the ‘oppressed.’

Constitution of Dalit identity, in this play, it is important to add, is predicated on more than a simple opposition to and negation of brahmanism. As the public controversy, in Karnataka, surrounding the play’s alleged distortion of the ‘past’ and misrepresentation of Basava’s life testifies, ‘traditions,’ whether of the elite or the marginalized, remain in constant danger of becoming rigid and oppressive at the hands of dominant formations that claim the sole right to represent them on behalf of all members of a group, a community or a nation. In this context, anti-modern positions that either uphold ‘tradition’ as self-evident and inherently plural or as pre-reflective and “intellectually unanalyzable” are unproductive, even dangerous (Alam 24-6). In very different ways, Karnad and Shiva Prakash underline the importance of constantly ‘secularizing’ traditions by subjecting them to scrutiny, creative dialogue, contestation and reinterpretation in accordance with changing political, social and cultural imperatives.

Conclusion

Shiva Prakash does not directly engage with the thorny issue of how religious difference may be addressed under modernity. However, insofar as the quest for the secular remains implicated in struggles for social justice, Mahachaitra may be read as underscoring the importance of expanding the discourse beyond counter readings of ‘faith’ and ‘tradition’ to what Rustom Bharucha calls “an affirmation of the contemporary” (In the Name 6). The dialogue
between Chennabasavanna and Machideva, to which I alluded earlier, is a case in point. As the
two characters deliberate on the future direction of the movement, the former suggests that their
only refuge from violence is submission and affiliation. They must leave the city, express their
solidarity with other shaiva groups that have the favor and protection of the crown, and eschew
controversy by steeping themselves in religious and philosophical conundrums. Machideva’s
emphasis on confrontation through taking up arms and waging war on sharana foes as a first step
toward survival, on the other hand, constitutes the narrative premise of the play. However, to
read this ideological assertion as making a crude case for a separatist minoritarian politics is
unfruitful. Instead, Shiva Prakash’s location of the ‘secular’ in the struggles of the marginalized,
as I shall demonstrate in this concluding section, raises crucial questions about context,
representation and subject formation in any articulation of minority rights.

Aamir Mufti’s insightful analysis and interpolation of Edward Said’s notion of “secular
criticism” into theorizing structures of identity in postcolonial contexts is pertinent here (Said 1-
30). Mufti turns to Said’s reading of the trope of ‘exile’ in Auerbach as a means to overcoming
the cultural relativism of anti-liberal positions on minority rights that valorize intra-community
dialogue and democratization in complete freedom from state intervention. For Mufti, ‘minority’
as agent of secular critique is based on more than a simple recognition of cultural distinction and
autonomy for difference alone, he suggests, instead of unsettling these categories, would merely
result in their entrenchment and perpetuation in terms of majority and minority. Rather, it seems
to me that Mufti’s interpretation of Said is based on the demand for a “strategic essentialism”
that allows the agent to inhabit the space of the ‘not-at-home’ (the threatened or the displaced)
within the nation precisely with the object of enunciating a critique of universalisms that are

---

49 Mufti himself does not allude to this concept from Spivak. See, Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak, In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural. Also see, Sarah Harasym ed. The Post-colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues.
predicated on an erasure of ‘minority’ as subject. He argues, via Said, for an affirmative minority discourse/politics that provides “a permanent and immanent critique” (Mufti, “Auerbach” 120) of the very structures that determine and fix the mutually constitutive relations of majority and minority. In turning “minority into the language and gesture of an affiliative community” such a position interrogates the “filiative claims of the majority” (121) while simultaneously deconstructing both identities.

In Said, ‘exile’ embodied in the person of the individual writer becomes representative of ‘minority’ status in general. The absence of contextual specificity opens up the idea to charges of cosmopolitanism (Robbins 25-37, Bharucha, Cultural Practice 17-20). Mufti invites a similar critique through his assertion that Saidian secular criticism is “imbued with the experience of the minority” (96). However, rather than unilaterally rejecting the intervention as elitist and homogenizing, I believe it would be more productive to enrich its possibilities by extrapolating its minoritarian impetus and reconstellating it within specific histories and “cultures of struggle” (Bharucha, “Cultural Transitions” 49). Toward this end, in the next chapter, I examine the relation between ‘secularism’ and ‘minority’ in the context of narrative figurations of social struggles, in India, centered on caste. Through a critical juxtaposition of texts by writers addressing different audiences and in a variety of genres, I seek to understand how these “parallel,” and sometimes competing, “discursive arenas” (Fraser 81) variously constitute questions of Dalit identity, need, and advantage in the vexed socio-political climate of our times.
CHAPTER 4
CASTE IN A SECULAR IMAGINARY: REPRESENTATION AND THE POLITICS OF DALIT IDENTITY

Introduction

“The struggle for the emancipation of Dalits needs a complete revolution …We do not want a little place in the Brahman Alley. We want the rule of the whole lane,” reads a frequently quoted extract from the Dalit Panthers Manifesto of 1973 (Joshi 149). Notwithstanding ideological differences within, this socio-political movement was arguably the first attempt, after Ambedkar, to forge a distinct, pan-Indian identity for those excluded from the postcolonial ambitions of both the Congress and an upper caste, Hindu dominated Left. Engendered by an upheaval in literature which, according to a leading exponent, was characterized by the themes of “revolt and negativism” toward a struggle for social and economic change, the Panthers broadly endorsed the vision and values of the writers who were its founding fathers (Dangle xi).

Accordingly, the term ‘Dalit,’ while taking caste based exploitation as its argumentative locus for challenging the powerful nexus of brahmanism and capitalism, sought to expand its emancipatory objectives to include women, peasants, the landless, tribals and religious minorities. Born of a social consciousness shaped by Ambedkar’s writings and speeches and

50 Dr.B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), Dalit leader, architect of India’s Constitution and of the Hindu Code Bill and the independent nation’s first Law and Labor minister was born, in grim poverty, of the Mahar caste of ‘untouchables’ in the western state of Maharashtra. In the nineteen thirties, forties and fifties, he led the community in a national struggle against the twin enemies of the Depressed Classes that he identified as ‘brahmanism and capitalism.’ A supporter of the Congress led anti-colonial movement on his return to India after earning a law degree at the London School of Economics and a PhD from Columbia University, he was gradually disillusioned by the scant attention paid by national leaders to the social problems plaguing Indian society. Their exclusive focus on political independence, he felt, would not benefit the most oppressed sections (‘low’ castes, tribals and women) unless radical social reform was also undertaken. Gandhi’s refusal to entertain the idea of independent electorates for Depressed Classes to facilitate their entry into the democratic process on grounds that it would divide Hindu society led to the Pune Pact (1932) which allowed, instead, for limited ‘reservation’ of seats in legislative bodies. Throughout the next two decades, Babasaheb, as he was affectionately known by his followers, clashed against the Gandhian influences within Congress and formed three political parties – the Independent Labor Party (1936), the Scheduled Castes Federation (1942) and the Republican Party of India (1956) – to enable the oppressed to actively participate in nation building. In 1937, he first proposed conversion as a way out of the hierarchical and inhumane binds of Hinduism. Finally, in a much-publicized ceremony in Nagpur in 1956, he led thousands of Mahars in a mass conversion to Buddhism.
intellectually committed to both socialism and Buddhism, ‘Dalit’ connoted an inclusive politics of the oppressed that combined radical cultural critique with economic and political confrontation.\(^{51}\)

The reasons for the decline of the movement in the nineteen-eighties are varied and reasonably well documented.\(^{52}\) Dalit politics, in recent decades, in meeting the challenges of globalization and a resurgent Hindu nationalism, has assumed complex and sometimes contradictory positions. The 2001 UN World Conference Against Racism, for example, saw attempts, by Indian Dalit delegations, to counter the repressive politics of a Right wing Hindu dominated state by internationalizing the issue of “work and descent- based discrimination” through an invocation of the discourse of universal human rights. Durban, then, represented a powerful symbolic and political move, by Dalits, to circumvent the nation-state and resignify

\(^{51}\) A contentious and much contested term, ‘Dalit’ (literally, ‘downtrodden’) carries a variety of connotations in intellectual and political contexts in India. Popularized by Ambedkarite neo-Buddhists in Maharashtra in the nineteen-seventies, the formulation, unlike Gandhi’s patronizing and depoliticized harijan (children of God), signified pride, protest and self-respect as well as a conscious rejection of Hindu karma theory and caste hierarchy. Today, some theorists like Gail Omvedt uphold the inclusive and pan-Indian referentiality of the term as used by the Panthers. Historian Romila Thapar has argued that, despite its homogenizing imperatives, the term denotes an important political category and must therefore be maintained. The majority of Dalit theorists today understand the term as referring exclusively to ati-shudras or those traditionally excluded from the Hindu caste hierarchy and treated as ‘untouchables.’ In terms of constitutional categories, ‘Dalit,’ understood this way, refers to Scheduled Castes. Others like Kancha Illiah propose that the term, used synonymously with Scheduled Castes, be extended to incorporate Other Backward Castes (shudras) and prefer the category ‘Dalit-bahujan,’ the suffix denoting ‘majority.’ This is compatible with the general sense in which the category was first used by Jotirao Phule in the nineteenth-century. However, Illiah adds that Scheduled Tribes (adavasis) may also be included in the category even though they are not strictly part of the Hindu caste order. For purposes of this chapter, I use ‘Dalit’ to designate Scheduled Castes (ati-shudras) and Dalit-bahujan to signify broader alliances between SCs, OBCs (backward, middle castes) and STs (tribals or adavasis). For more information on this subject, see Gail Omvedt, Dalit Visions; Kancha Illiah, Why I am not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva, Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy; Gopal Guru and V. Geetha, “New Phase of Dalit-bahujan Intellectual Activity” and Ghanshyam Shah ed., Dalit Identity and Politics.

\(^{52}\) Noted sociologist Gail Omvedt attributes the failure of the movement to increased political corruption in the eighties; lack of a unified political and economic vision among its leaders; irreconcilable differences between the Marxist (materialist) and Buddhist (cultural) strands within the movement; the fall of socialism in Europe and the onslaught of neo-liberal values and policies on political and economic systems around the world, including India; the poverty of the Left and its failure to form meaningful alliances with the anti-caste movement and the rise of a militant Hindu Right determined to stifle independent mobilization of oppressed castes in service to a monolithic Hindu identity. See, her Dalit Visions: The Anti-caste Movement and the Construction of an Indian Identity.
their struggle against discrimination in terms of global coalitions and forums of engagement.

However, the decade of the nineties also witnessed another trend in Dalit coalition building.

Prominent leaders of the Dalit Panthers like poet and former Marxist Namdeo Dhasal as well as a new generation of Dalits anxious to reap the benefits of a rapidly globalizing economy began to endorse political parties, like the Shiv Sena and the BJP, that have a long and uninterrupted history of anti-Dalit campaigns and initiatives. At the other end of the electoral and ideological spectrum, the ‘politics of recognition’ plays itself out in identitarian terms as disadvantaged groups embrace ‘caste’ as their sole ticket to political and economic empowerment.

This chapter focuses on discursive contestations of caste as a vector of identity and interest in the fractured public sphere in India in the years leading up to and immediately following Mandal. Taking as a point of reference, the recent identification and growing currency, in national and global arenas of research and publishing, of the contested genre of ‘Dalit literature,’ I analyze how authors, frequently operating within distinct interpretive domains, embody caste in terms of identity, exploitation, struggle, interest, and rights. Juxtaposing and foregrounding questions of representation in literature and journalism in terms of ‘truth,’ voice, purpose, and audience, I examine how discursive interventions that inhabit and address a “plurality of competing publics” (Fraser 81) variously negotiate caste and caste-identified group politics of the oppressed in terms of their potential to offer a secular alternative to both communalism and unfettered globalization. In this scenario, I use ‘representation’ in the dual sense in which Gayatri Spivak, glossing Marx, theorizes the concept in her writings on imperialism and subalternity. For Spivak, the notion involves two distinct but related processes, one political/legal (speaking ‘for’) and the other symbolic/aesthetic (speaking ‘about’) (“Can the Subaltern” 277). And, in thus cutting across literature into democratic politics and vice versa, this controversial issue within the
Dalit movement makes, as I will strive to demonstrate, for multifaceted exchanges between these different and heterogeneous domains.

In a recent volume of essays titled Touchable Tales: Publishing and Reading Dalit Literature, critic and journalist S. Anand poses a set of questions to a range of creative writers, publishers and academics with the purpose of initiating “dialogue and debate between various players – dalits and non-dalits – involved variously with dalit literature” (Anand 5). Commenting on the politics of selection, translation, anthologizing and canonization, writer Ravikumar takes issue with the inclusion, in a special volume of the Sahitya Akademi journal Indian Literature devoted to Dalit writing in Tamil, of work by non-Dalits. He also objects to the fact that the volume was edited and introduced by a “hard core, Delhi-based Brahman Venkat Swaminathan … who [he claims] had no knowledge of the Tamil context” (Anand 9). Ravikumar’s premise that, “non-Dalits cannot produce Dalit writing” (ibid.) signifies a departure from the definition of Dalit literature proposed at the first Dalit literary conference in Maharashtra in 1958 and subsequently endorsed in the sixties and seventies as “the literature written by the Dalits and that written by others about the Dalits” (Dangle 242) with a view to effecting change.

Ravikumar’s rhetoric is a defensive one that stems, no doubt, from legitimate fears of co-optation by a literary and cultural establishment that is largely bourgeois and upper caste. In this sense, his exclusionist idiom may be understood as conferring on Dalit literature the status of a “subaltern counterpublic,” an alternative preserve where “members of subordinated groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses” and “formulate oppositional interpretations” not admissible within dominant publics (Fraser 83). However, in addition to excluding those designated as ‘non-Dalits’ from writing or meaningful engagement with Dalit concerns, Ravikumar’s emphasis on lived oppression at the hands of upper castes as foundational to Dalit
knowledge and ‘identity’ results in the construction of a homogenized and, in turn, normative Dalit ‘experience.’ The controversy surrounding author Imayam’s portrayal of inter-caste relations in rural Tamil Nadu in the early seventies in his 1994 novel Koveru Kazhidaigal (translated as Beasts of Burden) is illuminating in this regard. The novel centers around the trials and disappointments of a Dalit Christian family of vanaans [washermen] who serve and live at the mercy of the Church as well as other ‘untouchable’ and ‘backward caste’ families in the village that have, over the years, become upwardly mobile by acquiring land, benefiting from government educational, employment and housing schemes and investing in small urban businesses and holdings. The novel delineates the ways in which capitalist modernity reshapes and reinforces, rather than undermining, ritual caste practices, so that those at the very bottom of the caste-class structure are necessarily the most vulnerable. Imayam’s focus on the mutual imbrication of caste and class both in terms of their material and ideological dimensions and his exploration of the stratified hierarchy of a system that promotes competition even among the ‘lowest’ orders fractures and calls into question monolithic conceptions of caste based solidarity. Put simply, the ‘enemy’ of the Dalit, in Imayam’s text, is not necessarily only the ‘Brahmin’ but a power structure based on a framework of inclusion and exclusion that frequently has the tacit consensus even of the most subordinated caste groups.

The notion, in the novel, that class differentiation, frequently aggravated by the welfarist initiatives of the state, far from ending inequality, results in internal fragmentation of caste groups, thereby falsifying attempts, by them, to project uniformity of interests and status is an important one. However, in holding ‘bourgeoisified’ Dalits culpable for perpetuating the brahmanical system of hierarchy and exclusion in the village economy by their continued oppression of poorer counterparts, Imayam has incurred the ire of many in the Dalit literary
community in Tamil Nadu. Raj Gowthaman, one of his most stringent critics, denounced Imayam for being a pawn in a Brahmin conspiracy to set Dalits against one another. The approbation of prominent members of the Tamil literary establishment, like S. Ramakrishnan and Sundara Ramaswamy, many of who are Brahmins, only strengthened the claim that Imayam had betrayed the Dalit cause. In his defense, Imayam contends that close-mindedness, lack of critical rigor and absence of internal critique among both writers and ideologues has severely stunted Dalit literature in recent decades. In order to meaningfully transform “the full dimension of the cruelties and humiliation [suffered by Dalits] into literary expression,” it is necessary, he suggests, to move beyond mere negativism and polemic, encourage debate and interrogation within and without and evolve a critical self-consciousness that, while remaining vigilant of new challenges, combinations and commitments, is predicated on a larger program for change (Imayam “Dalit Issues” 89).

Using the above exchange as a frame of reference, my textual readings are divided into three sections. The first opens up debates on questions of identity and representation via a reading of Mahasweta Devi’s novella Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha, which the author has described as “an abstract of her entire tribal experience.” An activist struggling on behalf of populations (tribals and ‘lower’ castes) marginalized by the so-called developmental imperatives of the state, industry and multinational capital for over three decades, Mahasweta is an interesting figure for several reasons. Bourgeois, urban educated and upper caste in terms of her own background and now the winner of several national and international awards for her commitment to tribal welfare, Mahasweta, though wary of completely undoing the distinctions between her writing and activism, nevertheless perceives the two as being on a continuum. Inscribing tribal stories in literature and journalism, she asserts, is a way of narrating their long
history of struggle and fortitude, of instilling in *adivasi* [indigenous peoples] communities, a sense of pride in their culture and of drawing the attention of the rest of India to a pauperized and forgotten people. To this end, her politics necessitates making ‘truth claims’ about her writing via an essentialist move that privileges experience as the primary guarantor of knowledge, a gesture that sets her apart from the far more cautious, deconstructivist maneuverings of her best known translator and “gatekeeper” to the west and, most particularly, to the Anglo-American academy, Gayatri Spivak. My analysis of Mahasweta’s narrative, overdetermined by the interventions of these two postcolonial feminists dedicated, albeit in different ways, through different discourses, institutional sites as well as interpretive communities, to making visible the position of the ‘subaltern,’ affords a space for unraveling the contentious issues that frame the identity, relevance and status of the ‘non-Dalit’ within the heterogeneous spaces that constitute Dalit-bahujan discourse today.

The second section shifts the focus of the debate on ‘representation’ to the ‘organic intellectual’ in the context of the Dalit movement. Datta Bhagat’s play *Routes and Escape Routes* (1987), in its complex staging of the ideological and methodological dilemmas confronting the Dalit movement in our times, offers a crucial point of entry into discussions about the changing role of the Dalit intellectual in the contemporary scenario. Its ‘action’ involves ethical clashes between its three central characters Kaka, Satish and Arjun who represent three generations of Dalit struggle since Independence and problematizes, within a different discursive domain from Mahasweta’s work, crucial concerns facing the movement.

---

53 In a review of Mahasweta’s writings, translator Sujit Mukherjee referred to Spivak as the author’s *dwarpalika* [female gatekeeper] in the west. Spivak cites Mukherjee in the translator’s preface to *Imaginary Maps: Three Stories by Mahasweta Devi*, xxvi.
The final section explicitly genders caste-inflected questions of truth, voice/agency, and audience raised in my previous readings by subjecting to feminist analysis the iconic figure of Phoolan Devi. Reading the extraordinary life of this exploited subaltern turned infamous bandit and politician and her subsequent consecration as national embodiment of lower caste struggle against oppression and injustice as text serves, I shall demonstrate, as a useful resource for analyzing the terrain surrounding controversial questions of authority, authenticity and responsibility in the context of Dalitbahujan political and cultural initiatives.

As I mentioned earlier and as my readings will illustrate, the three texts that form the basis for my discussions in this chapter, occupy and designate a plurality of contestatory discursive arenas on the vexed question of the relationship of caste and secularism. This widening of public debate on caste was signaled by the emergence and proliferation, in the early eighties, of “alternative publics” (Fraser 81) predicated on their challenges to dominant conceptions of secularism that, by rendering caste unspeakable, had effectively preserved upper caste privilege. In yoking together texts that sometimes pertain to distinct interpretive domains and, at other times, straddle multiple publics, this chapter implicitly addresses the question of inter-public interactions toward the expansion of discursive space on the role of caste in forging a secular imaginary.

Before I begin, a word about my own subject position(s) and investment in this debate is in order. While on a research trip to India in the fall of 2002, a friend suggested that I contact the Director of the Dalit Sahitya Akademi in Bangalore and request permission to use his library for a few days. I was still in the process of thinking through my project at the time and had just spent a few hectic weeks in Delhi, reading, conversing, cajoling, photocopying, tracking down and ordering material in libraries, archives, bookstores and publishing houses. I felt reasonably
assured by the amount and range of material I had collected and looked forward to sifting through it on my return to the United States a couple of weeks later. My friend’s phone call about possible resources in Bangalore, therefore, struck me as an unexpected windfall on an already ‘successful’ trip. Dr. V. T. Rajashekhar was attentive, polite and encouraging as I informed him of my academic and institutional affiliations and proceeded to summarize my theoretical and political concerns. However, it was toward the end of our conversation that, on his asking, I mentioned my last name. His tone changed without warning, I was abruptly denied permission to visit the library and he hung up the phone with, “I wish you people would just leave us alone. Let us live.”

I have replayed the conversation, over and over again, in my mind but have not been able to ascertain exactly what I said to offend him. The encounter was unsettling, to say the least, and its immediate effect was to drain me of any bravado I might have felt regarding my trip or at the prospect of the work upon which I was about to embark. However, in compelling me to re-examine my own identity and caste privilege -- marked by my name -- so assumed and unspoken as to become invisible, it led me toward a more nuanced understanding of my own imbrication in and complicity with structures of dominance. “In caste India doors open easier when you are Sudhanva Deshpande, not when you are Jang Chinnaiah. Even if both have PhDs. The tail indicates the kind of head you possess,” writes S. Anand in a recent article (“Response” hypertext version). Did the use of my name and my lack of consciousness of the ‘cultural capital,’ it no doubt carries, strike Dr. Rajashekhar as an aggressive assertion of my caste identity? On the other hand, as Anand himself acknowledges, surely relinquishing one’s name alone is not tantamount to a denunciation of casteism. Further, to what extent are Dalit invocations of ‘purity’ and ‘authenticity’ not only strategic but also inevitable, necessary and
empowering for the consolidation of identity in a social environment dominated by caste? And how can such constructions forestall the risk of reifying caste difference while leaving larger structures of inequality and oppression intact? The exchange thus suggests a further twist in the volatile issue surrounding the relationship between ‘identity’ and class in the context of Dalit cultural politics, one that I shall strive to probe in the following pages.

Representing the Nation’s Disenfranchised: Mahasweta, Puran Sahay and Pirtha

In a journalistic article published in Bengali in the mid-eighties, Mahasweta Devi observes that, according to the 1981 census, India has a tribal population of over fifty-one million (Dust 108). This diverse group, constituting a significant proportion of the nation’s population, continues to remain economically, socially and culturally disparate from the ‘mainstream,’ perpetually outside the spheres of ‘progress’ and ‘development’ and representing the limits of democracy. Set in the tribal belt of what, today, is the central Indian state of Chattisgarh in roughly the same period as the report, Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha contrasts and then forces into confrontation the parallel universes of the ‘outcaste’ and caste India. At the heart of this narrative that, through a series of juxtapositions, exposes and then powerfully interrogates the shifting perspectives that constitute the relationship of ‘center’ and ‘margin,’ is the journalist Puran Sahay, a figure representing a different kind of exile who must temporarily abandon the relative comfort and complacency of middle class, urban living to travel to the famine stricken, tribal district of Pirtha in search of a ‘story.’

The son of a former nationalist turned social worker, Puran is a widower with a teenage son and works as a journalist for a regional daily. He specializes in anti-establishment articles on caste violence as well as administrative corruption and inefficiency because controversy helps bolster newspaper sales rather than due to any sense of empathy or accountability to the people, the struggles and oppression that are his subjects. His general sense of rootlessness and
alienation and his disenchantment with his professional career infuse his personal life wherein he is estranged from his son and unable to commit to his sister-in-law Saraswati with whom he has been romantically involved for several years. His decision to travel to Pirtha on the request of his friend Harisharan, the resident government officer in charge of the district is, therefore, a ruse to avoid taking stock of his life and assuming responsibility for the people and issues that structure and define it.

It is worth noting that the reader – middle class, urban educated and likely to recognize the modern malaise of apathy that afflicts the protagonist – is introduced to Pirtha in its total isolation from the mainstream through the eyes of Puran Sahay:

The survey map of Pirtha Block is like some extinct animal of Gondwanaland. The beast has fallen on its face. The new era in the history of the world began when, at the end of the Mesozoic era, India broke off from the main mass of Gondwanaland. It is as if some prehistoric creature had fallen on its face then. Such are the survey lines of Pirtha Block. (Mahasweta Devi, “Pterodactyl” 99)

The cartographic description of this “place of perennial starvation” (104) reinforces its incongruity and anachronistic dimension. It is also prescient of Puran’s encounter with the eponymous ‘pterodactyl,’ a dreadful flying reptile reported as having been sighted by the tribals of Pirtha, “It was gliding rather than flying. It would flow like a wave, go down a bit swinging, rise a bit again. They raised their faces, saw it, and were afraid. Very afraid … the shadow moved with them” (103). As he interrogates a local government official about the incident, Puran begins to realize that his professional training, his book learning and lifelong journalistic preoccupation with verifiable and quantifiable ‘facts’ cannot serve him here. He must re-examine his objectives and stakes, facilitate communication by asking different questions but cannot comprehend what these might be. As the SDO describes the picture of the creature, engraved on the walls of caves and now deified by the tribals as a symbol of their civilizational ethos, Puran is conscious of a total intellectual and discursive break between the message and its recipient.
However, the desperation characterizing the moment marks the incipience of another level of understanding: “Are the two placed on two islands and is one not understanding the most urgent message of the other, speaking with vivid gestures on the seashore” (102)?

Using ethnographic detail, the narrative marks the socio-cultural and historical specificity of indigenous peoples and their difference and isolation from the energies and aspirations of both national and global configurations. This difference is further inscribed in the constant shifts in narrative form from realism, when describing the more mundane, urban concerns of Puran, Kausalji and the administrative officers, to mythical and allegorical techniques in descriptions of the culture and worldview of the ancient inhabitants of Pirtha.

However, Mahasweta’s telling remains attentive, at all times, to the heterogeneity of the field on both sides of the divide and the immense multiplicity of subject positions on the discourses of inclusion and rights. Furthermore, her critique implicates both the governing caste elite and a corrupt and inefficient political system embodied in the nation-state and voluntary organizations that, through their alliances with global welfare agencies, exploit the disempowered to serve their own selfish agendas. The government officer Harisharan, for example, must struggle against both the apathy and corruption of the administrative machine he inhabits and opportunistic NGOs that attract, precisely through their anti-state rhetoric, foreign funds in the name of specious poverty alleviation programs that almost never reach those they are meant to ‘save.’ Harisharan’s agenda for change involves “put[ting] Pirtha on the map” (137) by raising public awareness of the famine in the district and forcing the regional and central governments to intervene in order to safeguard the forests, lifestyles and traditional livelihoods of the Nagesia tribals. He hopes, in due course, to put in place state sponsored projects that will foster growth as well as economic self-sufficiency among the population. Kaushalji, his
exceedingly well-connected and powerful rival, is the head of an NGO that distributes food and 
supplies to tribals in return for their complete surrender. He aims to rehabilitate the people, if 
necessary against their will and, with the help of his brother-in-law, a builder, to transform tribal 
land into a picnic area for tourists. To this end, he is engaged in a pitched battle with the local 
administration over coveted building contracts for the region. Puran arrives to find him 
negotiating to persuade the tribals to pose for a documentary film on the situation in Pirtha. 
Unlike Harisharan, who cautions Puran against taking pictures that will exoticize the people and 
trivialize the urgency of their crisis, Kaushalji is solely interested in using Pirtha to promote 
international awareness and garnering foreign aid for his work on tribal welfare.

Significantly, the greatest opposition to Kausalji’s scheme emerges from the tribals 
themselves. They repeatedly frustrate both state and private proposals for their relocation despite 
knowing that their continued survival is gravely endangered in Pirtha. Moreover, their resistance 
to putting their poverty and deprivation on public display is articulated by Shankar, the only 
literate tribal in the region, who acts as a mediator between the community and ‘outsiders.’ He is 
acutely conscious that modernity has brought nothing but disaster for his people. It has destroyed 
their forests, polluted their land and water with poisonous pesticides killing thousands and 
forcing the remainder into debt and bonded labor at the hands of upper caste landlords, 
moneylenders and even the Forest Department. Isolated from the mainstream, his education has 
not served any purpose as he ekes out a meager living as a bonded laborer to a local landlord in 
order to pay off a small debt incurred by his father over a lifetime ago. He addresses 
Harisharan’s exasperation at the tribals’ refusal to visit the local hospital for lifesaving treatment 
and drugs against mass pesticide poisoning and enteric fever by reiterating his community’s 
skepticism and indictment of both governmental and non-governmental initiatives:
Sir! Sarkar! It’s you brought these people, now will you too remain at a safe distance? Or will you make me say that we are surrendering? … I know, Sarkar. Everything finally becomes a deal, even giving food to the hungry. At this moment we’re eating his food, in exchange he wants to capture us in film. His dictionary cannot include the self-respect of the hungry… Our faith is hurt if you take pictures of us in this state. (168-9)

Ultimately, however, Kaushalji has his way and the film, due to premier in Geneva, is shot in total disregard for the will and reservations of its subjects. The tribals are robbed of agency as agendas antithetical to and beyond even the control of the local administration prevail, forcing Harisharan and his men to watch helplessly:

Now the pictures are taken. The women cover their faces with the torn ends of their cloth. The men turn their faces away. The scene of an old woman holding a skeleton baby in arms taking lentil-rice in her bowl, is captured very well and when the tape recorder is held close you can catch the rattle in the old woman’s throat and her mumble as well as the child’s chirping wail. (169)

Momentarily shaken out of his habitual detachment and forced, by the incident, to examine his own implication in this brutal narrative of greed and exploitation, Puran’s first instinct is flight:

Puran says, “I’m off.”

SDO asks, “Won’t you write about Bikhia’s picture?”

-- No. That’s their own affair.

-- You’re a journalist. Weren’t you intrigued?

-- It’s the soul of their ancestors, not mine.

-- And this famine?

-- Possibly the first culprit is the fundamental failure or heartlessness of the tribal welfare department from state to district to subdivision.

-- That’s all?

-- They are themselves guilty as well. With all these arrangements for extinction they are not extinct, don’t they have to pay for it? (170)

However, Harisharan and the SDO persuade him to stay a little longer and work on his report. Having vented his intense frustration at his failure to communicate with Shankar and
Bikhia and win their trust despite the tribals’ ability and willingness, to speak Hindi, Puran is brought to the uneasy realization that “language too is class-divided” (163). In an impulsive effort to compensate for the inadequacy of his journalistic training and to bridge the gulf between himself and the tribals, Puran takes to sleeping on a grass mat and eating maize powder. But he is rapidly made aware of the emptiness of such attempts, however well intentioned he might believe them to be, at establishing common ground by the persistent knowledge that the native inhabitants of Pirtha are literally that which he is not, that he is a mere spectator in their lives:

He is not a tribal. His naming ceremony is not called ‘napta,’ his marriage ceremony is not called ‘kirincho bouhu bapla,’ his surname is not ‘chonre,’ his clan-totem is not the lizard, at his cremation women will not play the main role, his ancestors’ soul does not become unquiet, he is not the prey of manmade famines every year. (185)

Like Shankar and Bikhia, Puran must inhabit the position into which he has been scripted by his history. He cannot assume another. Any intervention, however limited can, perforce, occur only from within this historically mandated space. Yet, Puran’s predicament, shared by his creator and, presumably, also the implied readers of Mahasweta’s text, and his consciousness of difference cannot and must not translate into an abdication of ‘responsibility’ any more than an espousal of commonality (of attitudes and experience) can become a definitive gauge of solidarity or ethical accountability. Characterized by caution and self-critique, always a negotiation and impossible to sustain, Puran’s acknowledgment of his own complicity in dominance and marginalization and his struggle to achieve ‘identity-in-difference’ with the tribals of Pirtha thus forms the elusive, yet fundamental, theme of Mahasweta’s account of the ‘pterodactyl.’

Upon his arrival in the area, Puran learns of Bikhia, the mute tribal boy believed, by his community, to have sacred communion with the pre-historic creature. Silent and suspicious at first, Bikhia gradually begins to trust Puran sufficiently to allow the journalist to accompany him
into the forest where he makes ritual offerings to the dead soul of his ancestors and prays for rain. Bikhia’s wordless communication with the pterodactyl is incomprehensible to Puran and reinforces the latter’s mounting awareness of his own futility and irrelevance to the colossal misfortune that is the tribal’s reality in modern India. Gradually stripped of his certitudes and his practice of living life vicariously in the refuge of books, Puran finds himself exposed and vulnerable to a worldview, symbolized by the reproachful gray eyes of the pterodactyl, with which he has no point of communication and about which “nothing can be said or written” (158).

Puran the modern man could not read the message in its eyes. Nothing could be known, can be known. One has to leave finally without knowing many things one should definitely have known. Seeing that Puran has understood nothing its eyes were closed since yesterday. The body seems slowly to sink down, a body crumbling on its four feet, the head on the floor, in front of their eyes the body suddenly begins to tremble steadily. It trembles and trembles, and suddenly the wings open, and they go back in repose, this pain is intolerable to the eye. Bikhia goes on saying something in a soundless mumble, moving his lips. (180)

However, as he bears witness to the ceremonious burial of a venerated creature whose image adorns the base of Bikhia’s hut, Puran begins to understand the profound connection between the aboriginal and his mythical deity. Beggared by the modern myths of development and progress and subject to repeated onslaughts on their identity and dignity, the tribals of Pirtha must create and cling desperately to their own legends for survival and to preserve their fragile connection to the past. The ancient civilization of indigenous peoples has been desecrated by the ravages of modernity and their sense of collective being, like the pterodactyl, faces extinction. Bikhia’s act of laying the pterodactyl to rest, Puran realizes, is therefore, a symbolic affirmation and a simultaneous letting go of the ancient soul of his ancestors, an acknowledgement of the “noble death of a noble myth” (180). And as an ‘outsider’ chosen by Bikhia, the guardian of the ancestral soul, to observe “what was intimately their own” (182), Puran can no longer remain detached. The pterodactyl, “myth and message from the start” (195) implicates him in the fate of
the tribals and in their struggle for survival, just as his brief presence in their midst will persist in
their collective memory as the subject of new legends and stories.

Puran is not a tribal. The “pen” (186) is his only mode of intervention and he must,
therefore, uphold his faith in his craft. But he is conscious that, despite their temporary
comradeship, he will not inscribe his encounter with Bikhia in his report. The linguistic and
analytical codes of his world do allow for such an undertaking without exoticism and violating
all that the tribals hold sacred. But, the narrative implies, precisely because Pirtha’s
disenfranchised cannot represent themselves so as to be heard by the powers that be, he must
speak on their behalf. At the same time, his own ‘truths’ and totalities have been irrevocably
challenged by the ‘experience’ so that he must now strive, in his journalistic endeavors, to
“calculate the ratio [of India’s battle with hunger, illiteracy and want as the nation proudly
celebrates forty years of Independence] from the position of people like Bikhia” (162).

Significantly, despite the relentless indictment, in her writings, of the failures of the
nation(-state) to provide for all its peoples, Mahasweta does not advocate an ethnically driven,
separatist politics of the oppressed. And while she recommends that the cultural distinctness of
tribal populations – their languages, legends, habits and lifestyles – be ‘recognized’ by the
mainstream, I read her work is a constant reminder of the dangers attendant upon a reification of
cultural difference at the expense of economic and political empowerment. Nowhere is this more
apparent than in a conversation with her translator Gayatri Spivak. In response to Spivak’s
suggestion that her fiction defends the local and the particular in her depiction of India’s
adivasis, Mahasweta speaks of the typicality of the characters and geography of her stories, of
Palamu and Seora as a “mirror of tribal India” (“Pterodactyl” xii). She argues that disunity
among the tribals makes them easy prey for Hindu nationalist and other divisive forces and that
in order to facilitate their effective insertion into the mainstream, tribals must present a united front in their demand for recognition and redistributive justice. Here is a short excerpt from her exchange with her translator:

Will it be all right to say that you are not keeping their separate ethnicities alive …

No, no, no.

… but a general tribal identity as Indian.

General tribal as Indian, not only that. They are Indians who belong to the rest of India. Mainstream India had better recognize that. Pay them the honor they deserve. Pay them the respect they deserve. (xvii)

Puran’s exposé of the “ruthless unconcern” (195) of both the administration and ordinary citizens like himself to the situation of India’s tribals, which concludes the narrative, is underscored by just such a plea for contact and inclusion. Self-critical and characterized by eternal vigilance, implicit in Puran’s proposals for Pirtha and his urgent call for real “exchange” (195) between the worlds of the tribal and the non-tribal is an acknowledgment of the agency and subjectivity of the tribals themselves and a willingness to “be rendered finite by the presence of the [subaltern]” (Chakrabarty, Habitations 36). This transcendence of the purely cognitive to embrace the ethical and moral encapsulates Mahasweta’s (im)possible vision of “love beyond reason” (195), unattainable and yet relentlessly pursued, with justice as its ultimate objective.

**A Movement in Search of Direction: Routes and Escape Routes**

In the interstices of Mahasweta’s text, yet never actually appearing in it is the Dalit journalist Surajpratap, Puran’s predecessor in Pirtha. Like the ‘lower’ caste and tribal politicians in the narrative whose only defense against marginalization is succumbing to bourgeoification by the political system and their consequent neglect of tribal interests, this ‘organic intellectual’ too has failed in his attempts to intervene on behalf of the Nagesia tribals. Harisharan informs Puran, on the journalist’s arrival in the region, that his ‘experience’ in Pirtha and the report that
followed it, not only cost Surajpratap his job, it triggered a nervous breakdown. Puran is repeatedly admonished not to surrender to the impulses that, despite his best motivations, rendered Surajpratap ineffectual. An ever-present absence in the text, Surajpratap serves as a poignant reminder, to Puran, of the precarious and life-altering course he himself is about to traverse and of his immense responsibility in shaping the outcome.

The Dalit intellectual, located on the periphery of Mahasweta’s text but nevertheless haunting it, forms the focus of this section. In the conclusion to the six-hundred odd pages that comprise Arun Shourie’s (in)famous critique of Ambedkar’s role in the anti-colonial struggle and the approach of the Dalit leader and architect of India’s Constitution to the national movement led by Gandhi and Nehru this former journalist turned advocate for Hindu nationalist causes, records a personal anecdote. Shourie notes that the incident occurred in 1996, following the publication of some of his articles, on Ambedkar, as a precursor to his book, which appeared a year later in commemoration of fifty years of Indian independence. In the final chapter of the book, this former editor of the Indian Express newspaper who gained much of his reputation as an investigative journalist and public intellectual known for his persistent contestations of the political establishment during Indira Gandhi’s term in office in the seventies and eighties, alludes to a function, in Pune, organized by a former civil servant, at which he had been invited to speak.

Having carefully established the liberal, secular, nonpartisan, i.e., ‘good’ nationalist, motivations underlying the event via allusions to his friend, the former I.A.S.54 officer’s resignation from government service to “do more for society by entering public life” (Shourie 619), Shourie’s narrative cuts swiftly and abruptly to the moment, a few minutes later, when upon his completion of a short speech, he was unceremoniously splattered with black paint by a

54 Indian Administrative Service.
group of unidentified youth lurking in the shadows of the podium. The rest of the chapter is devoted, ostensibly, to understanding the impetus behind the disruption within the larger framework of Dalit politics.

Throughout the chapter, Shourie attempts to juxtapose his scholarly and reasoned refutation of the action, despite his justifiable indignation, to the lumpenism and vituperative name-calling that he claims, substitutes for genuine debate among both Dalit political leaders and intellectuals. Not surprisingly, his analysis elides the powerful symbolic resonance of the act of public shaming -- ‘blackening’ (connoting ethnic and racial dimensions of caste) the face an ‘upper’ caste person -- in an environment where caste hierarchies are routinely enforced/maintained by violence and the public humiliation of Dalit bodies through subjection to demeaning and undervalued manual and sexual labor. His charge implicates not only local leaders of the Republican Party of India who planned the incident in Pune to denounce Shourie for “defaming Dr. Ambedkar” (Shourie 620) but extends to those like V.T. Rajashekhar, the editor of the Bangalore based magazine Dalit Voice, whom Shourie accuses of “spreading poison in the name of ‘Dalits” (625), and of being “a curse on public discourse and therefore on our country today” (632).

My intention in referencing Shourie’s critique of contemporary Dalit interventions is not to lend credence to his unmistakably communal agenda or to legitimate his interpretation of Ambedkar. Rather, I seek to deploy Shourie’s evaluation of Rajashekhar, based on select writings by the latter, as a point of entry into crucial debates within the Dalit movement in the contemporary context. In an article in Dalit Voice, written as a rejoinder to Shourie’s attack on Ambedkar and cited by the author in this section, Rajashekhar justifies the action taken by the Ambedkarites of Pune in what he refers to as “a public meeting of Socialist Brahmins” (qtd. in
Shourie 626). The bulk of the article is devoted to tracing the personal transformation of Shourie from a “bitter critic … into a blind admirer of brahmanism” (627) and an adversary of minorities in general. Replete with allusions to Shourie as “the Hindu Nazi journalist” and “the Punjabi Brahmin”(626), the article ends on a note of triumph as Rajashekhar warns that as more and more Dalits become enlightened in the ideas of Babasaheb, they will “blacken or even flatten the face of all the Shouries” (630) who stand in the way of their dignity and empowerment.

Curiously, despite his rhetorical affirmation of Babasaheb’s vision, nowhere in this article does Rajashekhar attempt either to refute Shourie’s claims or offer his own perspective on the continuing role and relevance of Ambedkar’s ideas for Dalit struggle today. In fact, in a subsequent article (also cited by Shourie in his book), Rajashekar asserts that any attempt to grapple seriously with Shourie’s writings or redress the balance by offering an alternative perspective on Ambedkar is to validate the anti-Dalit propaganda that passes for objective journalism in caste India. Such a move, endorsed by “simpletons among Dalit scholars” (Rajashekar, qtd, in Shourie 633) he avers, would only serve the interests of Shourie and his upper caste cohorts by giving their work more prominence than it deserves. Strangely, Rajashekar, a journalist and public intellectual in his own right, concludes his assessment by reiterating that the response of the Ambedkarites of Pune was far more effective, by way of teaching Shourie a lesson, than any written rebuttal could ever be.

Rajashekar’s polemic, surprisingly similar to Shourie’s own style, has its merits. However, it is not without its critics within Dalit intellectual circles. In his response to Shourie’s book, Gopal Guru makes several crucial observations (“Understanding” 156-7). He points out that lack of rigorous intellectual engagement among Dalit scholars in recent decades, with Ambedkar’s writings and his deep reservations about supporting the Congress led national
movement has left the field open to misrepresentation and is responsible, in large part, for the attention and interest elicited by Shourie’s work. This ranges from denouncing Ambedkar as anti-national (as Shourie does) to co-opting him and, by extension, Dalit initiatives as a whole, within Hindutva paradigms. Guru also points out that to ignore the text as a way of diminishing its credibility could, in the present context of rising Hindu nationalist frenzy, only serve to strengthen its claims. That, in addition to systematically discrediting Shourie’s interpretation through a critical engagement with Ambedkar’s body of work, it is also necessary to make visible its larger, less obvious, imperatives within the framework Hindu nationalist perceptions of Dalit consolidation, political assertion, contestation and reshaping of nationalist discourse.

Further, it seems to me that the controversy surrounding the meaning of Ambedkar foregrounds the dearth of rigorous internal critique within the Dalit intellectual tradition today. This lack, recognized by and a subject of debate within newly constituted institutions like the Dalit Intellectuals’ Collective (DIS) and the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW), produces seemingly paradoxical consequences. On the one hand, the resistance to interrogation within and exclusive obsession with critiquing mainstream discourse has hindered the development of larger transformative models or an alternative theoretical and ideological perspective (Guru and Geetha, “New Phase” 130). It has also resulted in a merely rhetorical affirmation of the emancipatory framework provided by Ambedkar as given, absolute and indisputable. On the other hand, in the realm of politics, Ambedkar only holds symbolic significance in a rapidly globalizing economy where short-term coalitions and alliances as a means of access to already scarce state resources takes precedence over a more enduring vision for change. The Bahujan Samaj Party’s electoral alliances with the BJP and Dalit support for

55 For insights into the ways that Ambedkar has been appropriated by Hindu nationalist formations, see Gopal Guru, “Appropriating Ambedkar.”
state chief minister Narendra Modi in his genocide against Muslims in Gujarat, in 2002, are only some examples, from the last decade, of such regressive but politically expedient combinations.

Datta Bhagat’s 1987 play, Routes and Escape Routes anticipates and opens up a rich space for discussion of some of these volatile issues. Written in an atmosphere of intense debate and turmoil, within the movement and the larger social fabric, which culminated in the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report in the early nineties, the narrative is structured around ideological clashes between its three central characters, Kaka, Satish and Arjun, who represent three generations of Dalit struggle. The ‘action’ throws into relief complex questions and challenges before the Dalit intellectual in the contemporary scenario and attempts to explore the choices and future of a socio-political movement shaped by the leadership and influence of Ambedkar.

Dalit Theater, within which Bhagat locates his craft, first emerged in the Mahar dominated districts of Maharashtra in the nineteen forties and fifties.56 Conceived by the dual impulses of propagating the teachings of Ambedkar and of the Buddha as a means of political and cultural mobilization of the rural masses, the movement transformed and eventually replaced the traditional tamasha dominated by upper caste, Hindu themes and symbols by the Ambedkari jalsa and the oral, folk theatrical medium of the kalapathak.57 Today, the Dalit Drama Movement continues to maintain its separation from mainstream Marathi theater as an alternative venue for exposition and protest against caste oppression, Hindu majoritarianism and social

56 An ‘untouchable’ caste in the western Indian state of Maharashtra to which Ambedkar belonged. Assigned to perform menial and ritually ‘unclean’ tasks like scavenging and sweeping, they were considered among the most lowly even in the ati-shudra hierarchy. However, as the main support and membership for Ambedkar’s radical movement against caste and untouchability in the thirties and forties, the community experienced considerable empowerment during these dramatic decades. In 1956, at a massive public function organized in Nagpur, for the purpose, Ambedkar, along with millions of fellow Mahars, marked their wholesale rejection of caste and Hinduism by converting to Buddhism.

57 For detailed information on the evolution, subjects, style, composition and dissemination of these theatrical traditions, see, Gopal Guru, “The Interface Between Ambedkar and the Dalit Cultural Movement in Maharashtra.”
injustice. In this sense, the primary focus of Dalit theater, wherein plays are composed in the language of the region, is ‘consciousness raising’ among middle class audiences, Dalit activists, as well as the urban, working poor whom it seeks to mobilize. Datta Bhagat himself regards Dalit literature and Dalit theater as interdependent in the struggle for social transformation and emphasizes the latter as a vehicle for discussion and dissemination of the conflicts and concerns facing the larger movement in any given period (qtd. in Mee 16-17). In keeping with this perspective, dialogue dominates Bhagat’s plays over the physical and visual aspects of theater. Most of the ‘action’ occurs offstage and is periodically reported by the characters. More recently, however, Bhagat’s play, originally composed for staging in Marathi, has been translated into English and anthologized in undergraduate university textbooks for a predominantly upper caste, middle class, metropolitan audience.58

Set in a middle class, urban household in our times, Routes and Escape Routes depicts and then probes the limits of a social phenomenon that theorists, in recent years, have alluded to as a ‘secularization’ of caste in India.59 The result of political mobilization and horizontal confederation across and beyond its local and region specific arrangements [jāti] and hierarchies, caste in this environment resonates differently from its traditional/ritual manifestations. Dalit-bahujan self-assertion and participation in the democratic process, in recent decades, and the resulting destabilization of upper caste hegemony, has enabled a reconfiguration of urban social, political, institutional and administrative spaces and facilitated greater interactions between castes. Satish, a university professor, represents a small section of empowered Dalits,

---

58 I refer, in particular, to a new English textbook prescribed for study by undergraduate students enrolled in the recently revamped BA Program at Delhi University.

beneficiaries of the struggles of previous generations, who have successfully transcended the
cultural and occupational limitations imposed on them by karmic hierarchies to enter the
professional, middle class. In their hypogamous marriage and their worldview, he and his wife
Hema represent the ‘secular’ voices in the play. Kaka, Satish’s uncle and his lifelong guardian
and mentor, is a former activist and unquestioning follower of Ambedkar. He disapproves of
Satish’s marriage and unlike his nephew, has no faith in the neutrality or fairness of a system still
dominated by upper castes, believing that India’s Dalits must look after their own interests.
Community solidarity and dedication to the ideals of Ambedkar matter to him above all else and
the opening act of the play reveals Kaka making preparations for the construction of a Buddhist
vihara in the locality, a symbolic assertion of Dalit pride and socio-religious difference. The
third character is Arjun, Hema and Satish’s teenage ward and the son of a widowed wage
laborer, also fiercely committed to social change. He is involved in dubious negotiations with
local authorities to help Dalit slum dwellers gain access to state-sponsored housing intended for
flood victims.

As the dialogue unfolds, the ideological differences between the three male characters and
their individual preferences and prejudices regarding mobilization around caste identities, the
political and cultural mainstream, their understanding of power and disenfranchisement within
the nation and their larger aspirations for a movement directed toward change become apparent.
A propos questions of identity and citizenship in their mutual imbrication with the constitutional
discourse of rights, these conflicts of attitude and perception invoke and implicate the
intermediary realm between the state and civil spaces, simultaneously marking both success and
crisis in the democratic process, that Partha Chatterjee calls “political society.” In this emergent
and continually churning arena of “strategic maneuvers, resistance and appropriation” by parties,
social movements and pressure groups, Kaka struggles to preserve a distinct political and cultural identity for Dalits (Chatterjee, “Beyond” 32). A Republican Party of India activist who participated in Ambedkar’s colonial satyagrahas, he is proud to carry on his revered leader’s political and spiritual legacy by his eternal vigilance and exposure of the ugly face of a brahmanical nationalism masquerading as secular and inclusive. To this end, he endorses Arjun’s view that caste must be fought with caste and that Dalits must consolidate and preserve, rather than undermining, their autonomy and difference from the ‘mainstream.’ He disapproves of Satish’s propensity to work with rather than against a flawed and unjust political and legal apparatus as also his nephew’s marriage to a ‘Brahmin,’ interpreting both choices as symptomatic of bourgeoisfication and betrayal of community.

Satish, the educator, by contrast, is deeply distrustful of the politics of opportunism and the departure from Ambedkar’s ideals that he detects in current trends within the movement and prefers to distance himself from it. Having been discriminated against professionally and in his personal life and aware that his marriage is regarded, by both savarnas [upper castes] and Dalits, as prompted by the desire for upward mobility, Satish has no illusions about the persistent and endemic character of caste within the social and political imaginary. However, he expresses deep reservations about a defensive and exclusivist Dalit politics driven solely by short-term benefits and predicated on a monolithic and self-perpetuating caste identity that, in turn, risks becoming entrenched and oppressive.

Ambedkar’s recognition that the formation and survival of caste are structured around cultural codes of gender and kinship constitutes an important theme in Bhagat’s play. Control over the circulation of women (their sexuality) through the institution of endogamous marriages
and reinforced by caste bound purity-pollution rituals over which they preside, Ambedkar emphasized, are intrinsic to the maintenance of *jati/varna* hierarchies. He writes:

There are many Castes which allow inter-dining. But it is a common experience that inter-dining has not succeeded in killing the spirit of Caste and the consciousness of Caste. I am convinced that the real remedy is inter-marriage. Fusion of blood alone can create the feeling of being kith and kin and unless this feeling of kinship, of being kindred, becomes paramount the separatist feeling – the feeling of being aliens – created by Caste will not vanish. Among the Hindus inter-marriage must necessarily be a factor of greater force in social life than it need be in the life of non-Hindus. Where society is already well-knit by other ties, marriage is an ordinary incident of life. But where society is cut asunder, marriage as a binding force becomes a matter of urgent necessity. The real remedy for breaking Caste is inter-marriage. Nothing else will serve as the solvent of Caste. (qtd. in Rao 23)

In Bhagat’s narrative, Hema’s transgression of caste boundaries through inter-marriage renders her a target for the collective patriarchal ire of both communities. Denigrated by Kaka for having “neither religion nor God” (Bhagat 289), yet constantly reminded that she was born a Brahmin and can never take the place of the Dalit woman thus denied the right to be Satish’s wife, Hema’s growing resentment and sense of alienation are compounded by rumors about her questionable antecedents, among Brahmins like the former freedom fighter Dasarao Joshi. Joshi insinuates that although Satish capitalizes on his wife’s status and considers himself “half Brahmin” (318) through marriage there is no conclusive proof of Hema’s natal heritage. Hema’s predicament, therefore, underscores the complex relationship between gender, caste, agency/choice and desire. It bears testimony to the absence of a language that recognizes even the possibility of desire between a Dalit man and an upper caste woman, except through the discursive grid of rape and the ubiquitous threat of emasculation of upper caste men by the ‘violation’ of their women, which, in turn serves as a rationale for the contestation and even annulment of such disruptive alliances.

Unable to bear the repeated slurs on her character and choices, she explodes:
…If you call someone a Mahar, that’s an insult! And what if you call someone a Brahmin? Is that supposed to be an honor? I rejected my caste when I married you. It’s a deliberate insult to me to be called a Brahmin! A downright affront! Everybody claws at me with their savage caste nails. Deliberately or without being aware of it. Whatever their intentions, every blow inflicts a new wound on me. But who cares? Who feels it’s wrong? (Silent). I accepted this reality with my eyes open. And I must, alone, build the inner strength to endure all this. But at the moment I feel weak. A little support is all I want ….

Stripped of her former idealism and, by her own admission, rendered more cautious and cynical by the harsh lessons of experience, Hema warns Dasarao’s daughter of the difficult path ahead, to the point of discouraging her attraction for Arjun, should Sonal not comply with her father’s expectations.

However, the crisis in the play that forces the conflicts between the three male characters to a head involves the central, but markedly absent, figure of a Dalit woman. First introduced in the opening act, as one of Kaka’s many ‘causes,’ Shewanta, the forsaken widow of a rickshaw puller killed in a traffic accident, becomes the mute terrain on which the contradictions surrounding the fraught question of Dalit empowerment are enacted. As Kaka and Arjun claim her as an ultimate emblem of caste oppression and social injustice and, therefore, as a justification for their politics, Satish’s reluctance to subvert the law to help Shewanta find employment sets in motion a series of events that, in spiraling out of the protagonists’ control, culminate in her brutal murder in an inter-caste riot. As news of Arjun’s involvement in violence, bribery, embezzlement and extortion to appease local politicians and mob bosses, his injunction to poor Dalits to forcibly occupy government housing and his consequent neglect of Shewanta’s plight in pursuit of larger ambitions surfaces, so does the question of the correlation between politics, ideology and accountability in a profoundly imperfect environment dominated by corruption and systemic inequality. Shewanta’s death produces intense grief, disillusionment and introspection in Kaka who finally recognizes the gulf between his commitments and Arjun’s
despite the latter’s espousal of the rhetoric of Ambedkarite radicalism and revolution. His final cry is one of dismay and indignation:

Satish, my heart had expanded like the sky when I saw Arjunya’s daring. I felt as strong as an elephant! I said at last there’s someone among us who’s man enough! People like you had proved to be a pure waste. Your education has ruined you. But here was a ray of hope at last! … These boys showed a new courage, and I felt alive again! But even they are going the same way now. Go, go, all of you. Go the same way. But this Kaka is the genuine heir of Babasaheb. Go accept those garlands! Bow down before them if you want to. But I won’t. Never. Who is that, offering me five thousand rupees? The minister? Oh, the guardian minister? Whose guardian? Go away, you scum! Go get your knighthood from them! This old man will break but will not bend. Don’t you dare touch this statue! Even your shadow, your murderer’s shadow, will defile it. You murdered Shewanta! Took the life of that poor widow! Get out, get out of here, get lost! (334)

Kaka dies firmly clutching a statue of the Buddha sculpted for installation at the vihara, a touching symbol of the unfulfilled dreams of a fading generation of Dalit activists deeply pessimistic about the future of the movement and of the ability of their successors to carry the torch and continue to struggle on behalf of society’s oppressed and disenfranchised.

For better or worse, Bhagat implies, the generation that matured and found enlightenment with Babasaheb is gone and the future of the movement lies with Satish and Arjun who despite their irreconcilable differences must, for the sake of the larger good, find points of influence and intersection, rigorously and creatively re-examine -- possibly with the object of revitalizing -- the framework of their predecessors in light of new obligations and challenges and seek like-minded allies who, while not comprising the movement, will help reshape its methods and goals in productive and progressive ways.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the most riveting scenes in the play involve verbal confrontations between Satish and Arjun over the categories that constitute subalternity and the troubling question of how a Dalit identity politics mainly predicated on the achievement of bourgeois equality through inclusion within brahmanical hierarchies may be expanded to interrogate and, hopefully, even redefine the very structures and ideologies of dominance.
Arjun’s strategic distinction between flood victims who are Dalits and those who belong to *savarna* castes and his readiness to sacrifice the rights of the latter to protect those of the former sparks off a caste-war within the Milind Nagar *basti* [slum] resulting in loss of life and property on both sides. As Satish expresses concern over the lasting impact of Arjun’s shortsighted politics on the efficacy and credibility of the Dalit movement, the latter defends his position on the grounds that, in a corrupt and caste-ridden society, each community must defend its own interests: “I don’t have monopoly rights to think on behalf of everybody! I won’t think for the others. I’ll think only of my caste. That’s all” (302). As violence and arson intensify, Arjun affirms his conviction in victory at any cost: “Oppression and injustice are crushing us to extinction and you still want *us* to think? That’s not on, sir, that’s just not on. This is no ordinary struggle and no ordinary movement. It is an all-out war … And anything is fair in war. The path which leads to victory is the right path” (322-3).

By contrast, Satish admonishes that, to pursue temporary gains and on behalf of a community conceptualized only in caste terms via the suppression of other intersecting vectors of power like class, gender, religion and sexuality is to lead the movement in a dangerous, isolationist direction; grossly undermine its emancipatory potential and ultimately render it vulnerable to co-optation by conservative configurations. “It is the poor who are fighting the poor” and “taking the law into their own hands” (331) he observes, enjoining both Kaka and Arjun to heed the message of Ambedkar’s historic Mahad *satyagraha*. A campaign for civic rights in the Konkan that culminated in the public burning of the *Manusmriti* 60 and a symbolic and compelling declaration of Dalit political awakening, that launched Ambedkar’s crusade against “Brahmanism as a philosophy of life and as a social order” (Ambedkar 212) in 1927,

60 Literally, “Laws of Manu,” an ancient law book of Hinduism that sanctions caste boundaries/hierarchies as well unequal and unjust treatment of both women and ‘untouchables.’
Mahad, in Bhagat’s narrative thus becomes, in my view, a crucial point of reference for rethinking the goals of the Dalit movement and of reaffirming, through critical revisitation, the principles of Ambedkar.

In a lengthy and impassioned speech, Satish reminds the characters and the audience that had it not been for Babasaheb’s injunction against retaliatory violence, the few reactionaries who attempted to provoke the ten thousand Dalit activists at Mahad by casting stones at their leader would have been killed and the town itself burned to the ground. Further, he points out that Ambedkar refused the much-needed support of ‘middle’ castes because it was conditional upon the exclusion of sympathetic Brahmins from the satyagraha. Cited as a lesson in the importance, for Dalit struggle, of long-term coalition building with secular allies dedicated to fighting oppression within but also across and beyond the confines of caste, Bhagat’s interpretation of the importance of Mahad echoes Ambedkar’s own definition of Brahmanism:

There are in my view two enemies which the workers of this country have to deal with. The two enemies are Brahmanism and Capitalism …. By Brahmanism I do not mean the power, privileges and interests of the Brahmins as a community. By Brahmanism I mean the negation of the spirit of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. In that sense, it is rampant in all classes and is not confined to the Brahmins alone although they have been the originators of it. (qtd. in Omvedt, “After Ambedkar” 146)

In arguing for the expansion of intersectionality as well as eternal vigilance and internal critique, the play thus makes a plea for a dynamic Dalit movement open to dialogue and integration of its strategies and demands with other social movements of exploited groups that derive their energies from similar ideals in order to advance a perspective aimed at overall social and political reconstruction. Moreover, Satish’s recognition of Arjun’s propensity for good as he prepares to bail the teenager out of jail and his decision, at the close of the play, to get involved rather than remain a perpetual skeptic on the sidelines of politics symbolizes, in my opinion, a
narrowing of the gap between the intellectual and the activist; between ideology and politics; between theory and praxis.

In the final scene, a pregnant Hema, once vilified by Kaka for her lack of faith, is seen offering flowers to the image of the Buddha. It may not be entirely misplaced to read this personal transformation in patriarchal terms as Hema’s containment and capitulation to the cultural codes of her marital household. Dalit leadership in Bhagat’s play is all male and his treatment of women is at best protectionist. However, while not effacing the gendered discourse of culture, I prefer to interpret the act of ‘conversion’ to Buddhism, in conjunction with the rest of my analysis in this section, as embodying the spirit of Ambedkarism. As Gauri Viswanathan notes in her brilliant study of Ambedkar, conversion, as a form of “political and cultural criticism” (213), though an important means of asserting Dalit agency and difference from an oppressive Hindu socio-religious order was also, in Ambedkar’s view, crucial to the development of an “alternative epistemological and ethical foundation for a national community” (ibid.). Contrary to popular belief that his motives were separatist (and therefore, anti-national), Ambedkar hoped that a revitalized Buddhism would facilitate universal moral and political reconstitution based on the principles of justice and equality.

Characterized by perpetual critique, the possibility of negotiation over simple repudiation (of one faith to embrace another) and by its ability to destabilize fixed, legislated identities, communities and their belief systems, the act of conversion, Ambedkar hoped, would enable the emergence of plural identities and values, of resistance and change. Hema’s decision to worship the Buddha and Satish’s resolve to play a more active role in the movement and in Arjun’s political life, parallel gestures of synthesis and integration, thus offer, at the play’s conclusion, the promise of hope and rejuvenation:
Hema: Humanity never dies. You want to work, don’t you? Arjun could’ve taken revenge on Sonal had he wished to. But he didn’t do that. He got her home safely.

Satish: Right! You’re right, Hema. Absolutely right! We must protect that tiny shoot. Not by remaining outside, on the banks, but by being with him, right where he is. Come, let’s go. I’ll bail him out. Let’s go.

(Satish gets up. Hema supports him. They start out. Both freeze. The curtain falls slowly.). (Bhagat 343)

**The Subaltern, the Text and the Critic: Reading Phoolan Devi**

The Dalitbahujan woman, denied voice and purpose in Bhagat’s complex figuration of intellectual dilemmas within the Dalit movement, forms the subject of this section. “Was Phoolan Devi folk heroine, political novice or exploited woman,” queries an obituary in The Hindu. (“Canonizing” hypertext version). Her repeated subjection to sexual violation, subsumption in crime, emergence in politics and brutal murder in the country’s capital in June 2001 evoked mixed and ambivalent responses as people in India attempted to come to terms with the widespread media coverage of her death and of her canonization by the Samajwadi Party as a national symbol of ‘lower’ caste struggle against oppression and injustice. While some alluded to her perspicacity as a politician and her commitment to issues like prison reform, educational and health services for backward caste girls and political mobilization to check atrocities against Dalitbahujan women, others indicted her for her political naiveté or characterized her life as one driven solely by self-interest.

My own interest in this narrative arises not so much out of a desire to unproblematically recover Phoolan Devi’s ‘experience’ of victimization and resistance in service to a transformative feminist and/or ‘lower’ caste politics but rather to ‘read’ her life story as “psychobiography,” to evoke Spivak’s term, a text that charts the constitution of self (“subject-
effect”) by lending insights into the operations of power (Spivak, “Political Economy” 227). My argument is predicated on an understanding of identity and experience, not as foundations of knowledge that pre-exist politics, but as historical processes that, through discourse, construct and position subjects in specific ways. Needless to say, my own historical and institutional location are implicated in my very act of reading Phoolan as text, the ethical ramifications of which I shall attempt to remain vigilant throughout my analysis.

In these pages, I subject two ‘representations’ of the Phoolan story to feminist scrutiny – Mala Sen’s biography, published in 1991, on which Shekhar Kapur’s controversial 1994 film Bandit Queen is loosely based, and I, Phoolan Devi, an autobiography published originally in French in 1996, which claims to act as a corrective to previous accounts by telling the life as it ‘really’ happened even as it purports to foreground its own “mediated and hybrid” character by alluding to the “unique [editorial] challenge” of an illiterate writing her own story (Phoolan Devi 467). My own self-positioning as reader in this matrix of power and in the constitution of knowledge about the “gendered, caste marked citizen subject (Rao, “Understanding” 204-247), to use Anupama Rao’s phrase, stems not from an uncritical desire for subject/information retrieval but rather from a recognition that discourses produce their own “truth effects” and that the basis of any truth claim, be it hegemonic or counter-hegemonic, is at best fractional. Truths, permeated by relations of power, and operating through exclusions and an erasure of difference may thus be understood as “politically interested figurations” (Spivak, “Imperialism” 225). I also read Phoolan’s complex positioning in these texts as a means to deconstructing the ‘victim-agent’ binary within feminist theorizing, a point to which I shall presently return.

As it foregrounds its own methodological and scriptural strategies – we are told in a publisher’s note that the editors of the testimonial followed the oral history technique of the
monologic interview during which the autobiographical subject told her story on tape which was subsequently transcribed and edited with her knowledge and approval at every step of the text’s production – the title *I, Phoolan Devi* consciously invokes and implicates itself within the controversial debates that still surround Guatemalan Indian organizer Rigoberta Menchu’s mediated testimony, also originally published in French, and which has been read variously both as resistance literature and as an instance of First World production, exoticization and commodification of cultural Otherness. Composed in a genre that is defined by the subaltern’s act of “giving witness to the ‘truth’ of her oppression, to a less oppressed other” (Spivak, “Circumfession” 7), the text draws attention to the fact that the practice of translation, linguistic, cultural and ideological, in the name of global and multicultural solidarities, is underwritten by power differentials which, in turn, construct the gendered and caste marked subaltern in ways that betray imperialist designs that further silence and disenfranchise the exploited and the oppressed (Carr 156).

However, rather than reading Phoolan’s subjectivity as always already confined and eclipsed by the power relations implicit in the text’s construction, I shall attempt to make visible its ideological contradictions by reading it as a site for the struggle of contending configurations. In other words, rather than remain trapped within a fixed dichotomy of power versus powerlessess, I seek to identify the marginal space occupied by the autobiographical subject, in this instance, as both a site of repression and resistance. In thus drawing attention to the troubling issue of power and textual authority, I shall also gesture towards questions of representation and responsibility, both of subject and interlocutor, which in providing a self-critique of autobiography, also signal the limits of the genre.
In her critique of ethnographic practices, Kamala Visweswaran posits “betrayal” as an allegory for a feminist theory “repositioning itself along the lines of difference” (90). She argues that rather than marking the impossibility of a feminist ethnography, the identification of ‘betrayal’ could inject a much-needed self-reflexivity into feminist practices, which seek to interrupt and interrogate their own authority. Visweswaran’s postulation is a useful one for thinking about both the power equations between women -- in this case, between interlocutor and critic on the one hand, and autobiographical/ethnographic subject on the other -- and as a signifier of women’s agency (92). In the rest of this paper, I shall use ‘betrayal’ as a trope for exploring the complex ideological processes of subject constitution within these two texts and point to the difficulties faced by a viable feminist practice that must negotiate the often (im)possible double bind between the desire to form alliances and coalitions across differences of caste, class and religion and the risk of appropriation that could result through the transcendence of difference in the name of a politics of change.

Representations of Phoolan’s early life, including Shekhar Kapur’s critically acclaimed 1994 film Bandit Queen have tended, as critics like Priyamvada Gopal have shown, to focus rather reductively on sexual violence, as opposed to other forms of social injustice, as the sole reason for the protagonist’s reinvention as an avenging bandit. Kapur’s narrative subordinates Phoolan’s protests against caste exploitation within the rural economy vis-à-vis land ownership and bonded agricultural labor to her personal vendetta against the Thakurs of Behmai as retribution for the murder of her lover Vikram Mallah and the subsequent loss of her ‘honor’ to upper caste men.62 I maintain that, in so doing, the film not only contains Phoolan’s resistance

---

62 The much publicized gunning down of twenty-two Thakur men by members of Phoolan’s gang in the village of Behmai in 1981 created a furore in the country compelling the Indian government to take serious steps to check the ‘dacoit menace’ in the Chambal valley. Even though Phoolan herself shot to national and international fame as a result of this event, the extent of her involvement in the actual murders continues to remain inconclusive. At the time
within a heteropatriarchal script, it also elides conceptions, among marginalized groups, of the
dacoit as baghi [rebel in search of social justice] and, therefore, of Phoolan as a social
revolutionary and a subject of popular balladry in rural North India. However, the film has been
mired in controversy since its release for another reason. Loosely based on Mala Sen’s biography
of Phoolan Devi, it is noted for its explicit and repeated depiction of rape and sexual violation.
The debate received a further twist when Phoolan herself alleged that Kapur had objectified and
exploited her body for the sake of profit. My own interest in this debate lies not so much in
determining whether the film text is either empowering or regressive in its representation of
female sexuality and agency as several critics have done but rather, to better understand
Phoolan’s own sense of ‘betrayal’ and her objections to its discourse around the question of
‘rape.’

Commenting on her biographical subject’s reluctance to speak about her own repeated
sexual humiliation at the hands of her first husband, the police, her kidnappers and the Thakurs
of Behmai, Mala Sen writes in her book, “… because we live in societies where a woman who is
abused sexually ends up feeling deeply humiliated, knowing that many will think it was her fault
… Phoolan Devi, like many other women all over the world, feels she will add to her own shame
if she speaks of the experience” (125). Sen’s reading constructs the culturally coded ‘experience’
of rape in universal terms as a violation of ‘chastity’ and ‘virtue’ recognized by all women as
such, irrespective of context or circumstance. In other words, Phoolan’s refusal to talk about her
abuse, although treated by her biographer with sympathy and understanding, is construed as
evidence of her subjection within reactionary patriarchal norms of feminine conduct. What such
an interpretation fails to take into account is the fact that women’s relationship to and rights over our bodies involve the interplay of complex vectors of power and are intelligible only within particular socio-cultural, economic and political formations and contracts that establish and regulate questions of ‘consent’ and ‘respectability.’ To treat ‘rape’ in essentialist terms as a ‘women’s issue’ as Sen seems to do is to elide the intersections of caste and class within the larger discourse of women’s sexual oppression. In a society, which continues to operate in accordance with the gendered ideology of separate spheres, ‘respectability’ is frequently a privilege only women with access to the ‘private’ can afford. A woman who deliberately or as a result of her circumstances disrupts this separation by exposing herself to the public gaze automatically loses the right to control her body and becomes public property. That the private is a sign of middle class dispensation not accessible to the Dalitbahujan woman is suggested rather poignantly in the autobiography when Phoolan recalls being forced to spend the night in a tree because her house, headed by a father emasculated by his poverty and caste position, can no longer offer her protection from the nightly invasion and assault of Thakur men. It is to the key role played by caste in the constitution of a woman’s right over her own body and control of her sexuality to which Phoolan alludes as she reacts with anger at the suggestion that she was, in actual fact, repeatedly raped by upper caste men in her village:

You call it rape in your fancy language … Do you have any idea what it is like to live in a village in India? What you call rape, that kind of thing happens to poor women in the villages every day. It is assumed that the daughters of the poor are for the use of the rich. They assume that we’re they’re property. In the villages the poor have no toilets, so we must go to the fields, and the moment we arrive, the rich lay us there; we can’t cut grass or

63 Towards the end of her biography, Mala Sen makes the startling revelation that while she awaited trial in Gwalior jail for eleven years, Phoolan’s doctors performed a hysterectomy on her on the pretext of removing an ovarian cyst. The doctor’s rationale – “We don’t want Phoolan Devi breeding more Phoolan Devis …(244)” is interesting for the further insights it offers into the class- and caste- inflected question of civil liberties for women and of their differential access (based on their social and economic status) to self-determination in the context of ‘motherhood’ and the right to abortion.
tend our own crops without being accosted by them. We are the property of the rich. (qtd. in Weaver 100-1)

Her unsettling of the meaning of rape by her destabilization of its ‘subject’ may be read as a form of resistance to the patriarchal notion of female sexual existence as synonymous with female ‘selfhood’ so that affliction to the former inevitably annihilates the latter. Phoolan’s comment that sexual violence is an inexorable dimension of lower caste women’s lives in rural India is not meant to trivialize their oppression but rather, I think, to resist seeing ‘rape’ through the frame of middle class (read privileged) morality and ethics as a violation of the victim’s conceptions of selfhood and sovereignty. By making visible the material conditions that effect rape as a lived reality in these women’s lives, Phoolan hints at the exclusionary designs behind positing the categories ‘woman’ and ‘women’s experience’ as self-evident in legal and feminist understandings and mobilizations towards greater gender justice. Also, the narrative’s rearticulation of the raped woman as one whose subjectivity is constituted, rather than devastated, through rape serves, as Sharon Marcus points out in her discussion of the discursivity of rape, to “challenge and demystify” the ‘act’ by refusing to acknowledge it as a “terrifyingly unnameable and unrepresentable” reality defies comprehension” (387).

The body as subject/object in pain figures prominently in the pages of I, Phoolan Devi. Subjected to sexualized violence and frequent beatings as punishment for her rebellion against caste and gender based oppression, the protagonist recounts her first experience of imprisonment as a lesson in social control. Though repeatedly brutalized in the police lock-up at Kalpi, she is forced to remain silent about her condition for fear of further reprisal. Naked and alone in a cell, her only thoughts are of suicide, “The horror and humiliation had left me with just one thought in my head … I wanted to die” (Phoolan Devi 181). When her father visits her the following morning, she experiences a sense of alienation from her body and an inability to communicate: “I
couldn’t feel anything. My body no longer had any existence for me. It wasn’t part of me, it didn’t matter to me, it didn’t belong to me …” (182).

In her reading of Elaine Scarry’s work on the phenomenology of pain, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan makes an important observation.⁶⁴ Even as she warns against too easy an invocation to the “subject in/of pain” in support of a feminist agenda, she emphasizes that to embrace the radical “alterity” of pain as essentially private and unrepresentable in language is to make it “ontologically autonomous, independent of the suffering human subject” (Sunder Rajan, Real 22). The dangers of such a construction are evident, for instance, in pro-sati rhetoric, which defines the burning woman as feeling no pain because her essential ‘self’ has successfully transcended the limitations imposed by her body. Rather, Sunder Rajan suggests, it may be useful to recognize that “an inherent resistance” is the factor that drives the subject who suffers to seek release from pain (ibid.). The subject in pain is, therefore, active/reactive to the condition, rather than one who waits to be aided. In reading pain as a fluid and dynamic state that marks the emancipatory transition towards its termination, Sunder Rajan identifies pain as constituting the subject in certain situations.

Interestingly enough, Phoolan’s detachment of identification or perception of self from her own body results in linguistic paralysis and the inclination to die. However, the undoing of the mind-body split characteristic of the earlier moment results in a discursive acknowledgment of the “materiality of pain” and returns the subject into ‘reality’ Sunder Rajan, Real 21). In attempting to tell her father what happened, both consciousness and/or pain return and with it, the desire for revenge: “I was beginning to remember what they had done to me. I began to remember who I was and what my body felt like. One by one, the memories returned: the pain,

---

the groans of the policemen, their insults. I wanted to see them roasted alive! I wanted to hear
them beg for mercy” (Phoolan Devi 182-3). At the level of narrative, the text’s recreation of the
‘experience’ of pain as historical, cultural and, in this case, gender and caste-specific, is an
important first step towards bringing it into the domain of “shared public discourse” by a
demystification of its apparent universality and/or unrepresentability (Sunder Rajan, Real 20).

The final enactment of ‘betrayal’ concerns, to my mind, the question of representation as
political, as ‘speaking for.’ Unlike Mala Sen’s biography which purports to be a plurivocal
narrative based on interviews with Phoolan, members of her family, her gang, village community
and government officials involved in negotiating and effecting her surrender and subsequent
imprisonment and which allows for a certain free play of voices and opinions towards the
construction of the biographical subject, I, Phoolan Devi is constructed as a monologue with the
primary objective of setting the record straight by having the subject testify to her own
oppression. The epilogue reads,

So many people had spoken for me without me ever having been able to speak for myself. So
many people had taken my photo and distorted it for their purposes … Assasins had
tried to take my life, journalists had tried to get my story, movie directors had tried to
capture me on film. They all thought they could speak about me as though I didn’t exist, as
though I still didn’t have any right to respect … Now, for the first time, a woman from my
community has been able to tell the truth about her life, and testify to the injustice we all
had to suffer. (Phoolan Devi 464, emphasis mine)

The editors’ framing of the narrative as a testimonial has the effect of constructing
Phoolan in a metonymic relationship to all the country’s disenfranchised and exploited whom
she is then, positioned as ‘speaking for.’ In its bid to constitute the textual subject as
representative and as one who “survived to claim retribution for herself and all low-caste women
of the plains of India” (Phoolan Devi blurb), I, Phoolan Devi both elides the immense
heterogeneity of the field and reveals its own participation in the production of cultural
Otherness in service to a somewhat essentialist and monolithic ‘Third World difference.’ The
collapsing of two distinct processes of representation as symbolic or pictorial (*Darstellung*, or speaking about), on the one hand, and as politico-legal (*Vertretung*, proxy or speaking for), on the other underlies an act of discursive imperialism marked by fetishization and interpellation of what is constructed as ‘third world’ experience for ‘first world’ consumption (Spivak, “Can the Subaltern” 277).

However, as the writings of Barthes and Macherey inform us, ideology, even as it appears coherent and definitive is inconsistent and indeterminate so that texts, while they may position themselves as singular and authoritative, on closer reading, often open themselves up to gaps and contradictions that complicate the issue of meaning production (Belsey 96-7). In other words, “the text’s desire” is not synonymous with its “fulfillment in the text” (Spivak, “Circumfession” 21). While the inevitable play of the “individual and representativity” is, as Spivak points out, “the impossible signature of the ghostly witness in all autobiography” (“Circumfession” 9), Phoolan’s own discourse within this text both militates against and capitulates to the editorial thrust of I, Phoolan Devi.

Through much of her narrative, the autobiographical subject constructs her agency, not by identity and affiliation, as the blurb and epilogue suggest, but through distinctiveness and difference. This difference, I read as the second act of ‘betrayal’ on the question of representation. Hence, recalling the first time she returned to her village as a bandit, she writes, “My return … to my village had taught me much. I had always suspected it, and now I had proven to myself how cowardly and spineless these people were … They were afraid of power – any kind of power. That was the only thing they truly worshipped” (Phoolan Devi 287-8). And some pages later, “I looked at my village of mud and straw and I wasn’t sure if what I felt was regret or relief. The huts, the cattle, the fields and the well, the wretched toilings of my
community, none of it mattered to me now. I had the freedom of the jungle” (329-30). In strategically defining her own agency as ‘difference’ by contrasting it with the supposed victim narratives of ‘others,’ Phoolan’s account both resists editorial authority in rejecting its construction of her identity as metonymic and simultaneously submits to its homogenizing tendencies by denying agency to all those ‘others’ whose ‘selves’ are reduced to a perpetual state of abjectness. Thus, even as she proclaims herself savior of the weak and the downtrodden, her relationship to those she ‘represents’ remains, in her text, as one of “disavowed identification” (Visweswaran 101).

**Conclusion**

I began this chapter by alluding to a representational crisis within Dalit(bahujan) discourse on questions of identity, ideology and accountability. In subsequent pages, I have attempted to problematize the notion of an authentic Dalit(bahujan) voice or position while remaining alert to my own background and investment in these discussions as well as to the ever present risk of silencing or appropriation of emergent identities of the marginalized by national and global interest groups. The question of “responsible self-positioning” in current debates within the anti-caste movement, be it the ‘organic’ Dalit intellectual or politician or a privileged ‘outsider’ such as myself with tacit affiliations to dominant (read middle class, upper caste Hindu located within the metropolitan academy) configurations, thus involves a critical negotiation between wanting to intervene and recognizing that the process of ‘knowing’ necessitates perpetual vigilance, not only toward others’ agendas but also one’s own. The solution to the crisis, may thus lie, as I have attempted to demonstrate in this chapter, in a constant awareness of the complex sites from which we speak and which determine what voices will be authorized and a simultaneous recognition that “partial knowledge is not so much choice as necessity” (Visweswaran 99).
CHAPTER 5
SECULARIZING FEMINISM(S): SEXUALITY, PERFORMANCE, AND WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

Introduction

A Citizens’ Report published in New Delhi in the wake of attacks, by the Right wing Hindu party the Shiv Sena, on Deepa Mehta’s 1998 film Fire begins with an allusion to the Emergency (1975-77) as the most blatant instance, in recent history, of state control and regulation of sexual behavior. Prepared by CALERI (Campaign for Lesbian Rights), an autonomous coalition of individuals and organizations as part of a public campaign aimed at breaking the silence surrounding lesbian lives in India, the document describes, in some detail, the indignities and human rights violations suffered by ordinary citizens subject to social engineering in the form of compulsory sterilization exactly twenty-five years earlier. However, the report underscores that these coercive measures lasted all of eighteen months. And, even though they spelled the suspension of reproductive rights, “sexual intercourse between heterosexuals was not banned” (CALERI 5). Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code which criminalizes homosexuality, on the other hand, has been in force since 1860. For people of alternate sexualities, the state of Emergency is permanent.

Titled Khaamosh! Emergency Jaari Hai [Silence! The Emergency is On]: Lesbian Emergence, this bilingual report deploys the Emergency as a trope for state sanctioned surveillance and control of sexuality even as it plays on the complex themes of visibility and invisibility surrounding non-heteronormative sexual practices in the Indian context. It is worth reiterating here that the Emergency resulted in an explosion of civic movements conceived in an

---

65 The IPC, a colonial legacy, was drafted by Thomas Babington Macaulay, better known in India for his infamous 1835 “Minutes on Higher Education.” Section 377, the antisodomy statute aimed at criminalizing “carnal intercourse committed against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal,” was introduced into the Code in 1860. For more on the subject, see for example, Suparna Bhaskaran, “The Politics of Penetration: Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code.”
adversarial relation to the state but nevertheless demanding accountability from it via the legal
discourse of rights. Not the least significant of these were women’s groups which subsequently
crystallized into the so-called Third Wave of the Indian Women’s Movement. Although these
groups were fragmented as well as diverse in ideology and purpose, some of the earliest issues
they confronted involved violent patriarchal control of women’s bodies through rape, domestic
violence, and the marital exchange of brides through the practice of dowry. By the mid-eighties,
gender discriminatory religious laws regarding divorce and maintenance forced the movement to
re-evaluate its feminist concerns in the light of its commitments to secularism and minority
rights.66 In other words, from its very inception in postcolonial India, the current phase of the
women’s movement focused on both the ‘state’ and the ‘family’ as important loci of women’s
economic, cultural, social and sexual subordination. However, in this discourse, explorations of
female sexuality remain primarily focused on identifying the woman’s body as the terrain on
which definitions of community – caste-based, religious and/or national – are traced. Sexuality is
thus rendered synonymous with violence and the narrative threatens to collapse into a victim-
feminism that evacuates the subject of any agency or desire. I shall return to develop this
question later in the chapter.

In an article elaborating the fraught relationship between gender and nationalism, R.
Radhakrishnan analyzes the problems inherent in speaking of one politics in terms of an-other
(“Nationalism” 77-95). Questioning the inevitability of representing one politics (e.g.,

---

66 I refer, of course, to the Shahbano controversy which involved a working class, Muslim woman’s recourse to the
Code of Criminal Procedure in order to claim maintenance from her former husband. Her action brought her into
direct confrontation with proponents of Muslim Personal Law who claimed representative status on behalf of all
Indian Muslims. The government’s intervention, ostensibly to pacify Muslim sentiments, communalized the issue
even as the Hindu Right clamored for the implementation of a Uniform Civil Code for all citizens as a means of
undermining religious (in this case, Muslim) family laws. The issue posed a dilemma for women’s groups who were
forced to choose between their commitment to gender justice (therefore, a Uniform Civil Code for all communities
of women) and their affirmation of the rights of religious minorities (in this instance, the Muslim community).
nationalism) as the horizon within which another (e.g., feminism) must be contained, he deconstructs the very notion of a representative horizon by positing all horizons as partial, shifting, subject to constant political negotiation and integration. Citing Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid’s introduction to an influential collection of essays on colonial Indian history, he points out that feminist historiography is not just women’s history. In forcing the recognition that every dimension of reality is gendered, it calls for a complete re-examination and dismantling of an “analytical and epistemological apparatus” predicated on “so-called gender-neutral methodologies” (Sangari and Vaid, qtd. in Radhakrishnan 79). And, in doing so, feminist historiography avoids the pitfalls of both separatism and additive analysis by offering the tools for “rethink[ing] historiography as a whole” (ibid.).

In this chapter, I shall explore some of the ways in which representations of non-normative sexualities in the post-Fire scenario make visible the unexamined presuppositions of the women’s movement in India and force a rethinking of feminist enquiry. To quote one example, in its efforts to “articulate and nurture the troubled connections of lesbians in/with the women’s movement,” the CALERI report successfully problematizes the binary separation, within contemporary feminist engagements, of sexuality-as-violence and sexuality-as-pleasure to which I alluded earlier (4). Moreover, by foregrounding the marginalization of same-sex realities as integral to the suppression of women’s sexuality in general, it explodes and expands existing feminist horizons of sexuality and gender. At the same time, even while it recognizes the consequent risks to coalition building, the discourse unwittingly participates in the inscription of another binary, equally limiting, that opposes pleasure and agency to any and all sexuality outside committed lesbian coupledom. I explore this problematic in the final section of this chapter.
This chapter consists of three main sections. The first explores interrelations between gender and sexuality in activist street theater emerging from the women’s movement in the nineteen-eighties. The plays, one of which I subject to detailed examination, were written and produced by members of Sachetana, an autonomous women’s organization of academics and development workers formed in Calcutta in 1981, the same year as the CPI(M) affiliated All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA). Consciousness-raising to generate public debate on important issues forms the main focus of Sachetana’s interventions. In fact, the group emerged on Calcutta’s political and cultural horizon in 1981 and launched its anti-dowry campaign through the staging of a play Miye Diye Shajiye [Giving Away the Girl]\(^{67}\) at Jadavpur University and subsequently in colleges, as well as in the streets and slums of the city.

In this chapter, I analyze Eto Rakhto Keno? [Why So Much Bloodshed?], written and produced in the midst of the Shahbano judgment and the ensuing controversy. My reading traces Sachetana’s complex construction of the feminist subject as enmeshed in and negotiating the contradictions surrounding contemporary articulations of secularism and citizenship. By way of conclusion and as a segue into discussions of sexuality within the women’s movement in the post-Fire context in the second section, I speculate on the playwright and the director’s reactions to and dissatisfaction with productions of the play despite their emphasis on its continuing relevance for our times. The third section examines the cultural activism of coalitions engaged in creating awareness and fostering public debate around the issue of lesbianism. Finally, I underscore possibilities for radicalizing feminist discourse and politics facilitated by a critical reframing of sexuality and of the subject of sex within a ‘queer’ framework.

---

\(^{67}\) The Bengali phrase translates as “The girl adorned.” Sarmishtha Dutta Gupta, on whose English translation of the play my reading here is based, has translated the title as Giving Away the Girl.
**Sachetana: Feminist Mobilization through Theater**

In her introduction to the recently published English translation of the three plays written and performed in the nineteen-eighties, playwright and founding *Sachetana* [literally, self-awareness] member Malini Bhattacharya stresses the group’s pioneering efforts in using street theater to sensitize people in West Bengal to issues and concerns of the larger women’s movement. It is worth pointing out that Bhattacharya, an academic and former Member of Parliament, has also written extensively on the Left cultural movement in India whose genesis she traces back to the early nineteen thirties and forties and to organizations like the Progressive Writers’ Association (PWA) and the Indian People’s Theater Association (IPTA) established in 1936 and 1943 respectively. IPTA’s politico-cultural partnerships, aimed at mass mobilization on a national scale, were underpinned by a concept of people’s street theater inherited from the Russian Revolution and the work of Romain Rolland. After a brief hiatus, the form was regenerated in affiliation with the CPI(M) as *Jan Natya Manch* [People’s Theater] or JANAM [birth] in the mid-seventies activism of arguably its most well known proponent to date, Safdar Hashmi. Hashmi was brutally murdered on the outskirts of New Delhi in 1989 by Congress party workers during a theatrical performance in support of communist trade unions agitating for higher wages for factory workers. In memory of its founder who died affirming his right to speak/perform,⁶⁸ JANAM assumed the role of a secular, cultural movement as the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT), a platform it continues to maintain.

Although Bhattacharya herself does not allude to this geneology in her introduction to the recently translated and anthologized *Sachetana* plays, my intent in delineating it is twofold. Firstly, I want to emphasize the broad commonalities of politico-cultural influence and heritage

---

⁶⁸ For a meticulous and perceptive critique of the cultural politics of IPTA, JANAM and SAHMAT, see Rustom Bharucha, *In the Name*. 
as well as purpose and period of activism between Sachetana and JANAM. Secondly, and more importantly, I seek, as a preface to my discussion of Why So Much Bloodshed?, to underline the differences in approach to gender issues between the two groups. To this end, I refer briefly to a JANAM play minimalistically titled *Aurat* [Woman].

One of the group’s most popular scripts, *Aurat* has been translated into several Indian languages and performed all over the country over two thousand five hundred times since its first Hindi production in 1979 (SAHMAT 1-14). In his introduction to a collection of JANAM plays, veteran actor-director and close associate of Hashmi’s, Habib Tanvir avers that street theater, an important component of urban counter-culture, differs from other forms of popular drama in its mission to “awaken, provoke, and mobilize” audiences toward socially transformative action (ibid., translation mine). Concreteness of situation and purpose, he adds, are, therefore, crucial to successful street theater. Attempting to analyze and pronounce a verdict on all society’s problems in one play, though tempting, often leads to didacticism and loss of audience interest. To have the most impact on any audience, a street play must limit its scope to a single issue. However, in the same essay, Tanvir recalls that *Aurat* was specifically composed to highlight the vast and complex range of issues determining the subordinate social status of women. The sheer multidimensionality of the issue of gender oppression meant that the question of gendered resistance could not be treated in isolation from the numerous other socio-economic and political concerns with which it intersects at several levels.

In keeping with the group’s focus on accessibility, music and stylized action sequences arouse audience curiosity as the serious subject matter unfolds. The opening scene reveals the “woman” lustily proclaiming her multiple social roles and relationships as mother, sister, daughter and wife. Within moments, her words and body language assume a different rhythm as
she elaborates her identities as a productive being – an agricultural laborer, a raiser of animals, a factory worker, a creator and nurturer of strong peasants and workers and, above all, a woman conscious of her oppression and yearning for freedom: a revolutionary. Repeated references to the material body bent in demeaning and back-breaking labor, to hunger, nakedness, and pain, juxtapose and interrogate bourgeois ideals of womanhood upheld by the middle class woman with her perfumed hair, soft complexion and clean hands. By contrast, this figure walks shoulder to shoulder with her male comrades as she makes the transition from worker to proletarian.

In framing the woman as subject to multiple and intersecting oppressions, the play deconstructs the public/private separation and subsumption of domestic and familial issues within a hegemonic class narrative still characteristic of certain aspects of Leftist political culture. Accordingly, subsequent vignettes present a nuanced critique of forms of patriarchal control which include the state and its functionaries: politicians, lawmakers and the police. Unpaid labor and domestic violence within marriage; gender discrimination in education and employment opportunities; sexual harassment in the workplace are successively indicted as being predicated on just such a gendered, binary separation of spheres. However, the concluding scene, in articulating resistance solely in terms of commitment to the “red flag” reframes the play as ultimately, a narrative about class and labor. As the call to battle resounds in her ears, *Aurat* stoops to pick up her red flag and shout the party slogan, an act of defiance that signals a workers’ strike. Her other relationships relegated to the background, she is thus recast as a comrade who must unite with her fellow workers to bring about the revolution.

A combination of factors, I suspect, were responsible for the ending. Fidelity to Communist Party ideology may have been one of them seeing that the play was especially commissioned for staging during a Conference of Women Workers of North India. Moreover, as
Habib Tanvir’s comments suggest, adherence to the formal conventions of street theater as defined by the group demanded that the script be simple, direct and purposeful. And, as the purpose of street theater is explicitly political, i.e., to inform with a view to inciting to action, it is possible that complexity had, perforce, to be compromised. Whatever the motivations of its creators, *Aurat* remains one of *Jan Natya Manch*’s greatest achievements in terms of the sheer number of runs it has enjoyed over the years. In the remainder of this section, I focus on *Sachetana*’s cultural endeavors in an attempt to demonstrate crucial differences in the way this women’s group charts its feminist subject and agenda.

Composed during the turbulent years of the Shahbano controversy, *Why So Much Bloodshed?* documents a crisis, within women’s movements, engendered by a “discursive displacement” of feminist subjectivity onto intersecting discourses of religion and minority rights (Pathak and Sunder Rajan 558-582). Shahbano’s emergence from the so-called ‘private’ space of the family and religious laws to seek recourse in the ‘public’ domain of secular law destabilized the boundaries between these two domains and called into question their mutual separation. As the divorced Muslim woman’s right to maintenance brought the state into confrontation with representatives of religious communities (both Hindu and Muslim) and reopened debates over personal/family laws versus a Uniform Civil Code (UCC), women’s groups came under pressure to choose between their support for secularism and protection of minority identities and their struggle for the reform of gender discriminatory religious laws governing so-called ‘private’ institutions like marriage and family. The Supreme Court’s 1985 ruling in favor of Shahbano’s appeal for maintenance under Section 125 of the Code of Criminal Procedure; consequent protests by the Muslim Personal Law Board claiming that Muslim sentiment had been offended by the court’s undermining of *Shariat* Law; Right wing Hindu demands for the implementation
of a UCC ostensibly to protect Muslim women from regressive personal laws; the state’s capitation to communal sentiment and reversal of the court judgment by the passing of a retrograde Muslim Women’s Act (1986) in Parliament; and the multiple questions and contradictions raised by these events for various players have formed the subject of many a report and research paper. They also constitute the immediate setting for the eight scenes of Why So Much Bloodshed?

Bhattacharya observes, in her preface to the recently anthologized English translation, that in the three plays that comprise Sachetana’s repertoire in the nineteen-eighties, violence is a dominant theme. The scripts probe the continuities between various forms of violence in society without assuming a causal relation between them. Consequently, violence also becomes, as I shall demonstrate, the leitmotif through which the public-private dichotomy is disrupted. Why So Much Bloodshed? opens with three short, staccato scenes staged in quick succession. In the first, a Hindu woman and her husband witness violence against their old Muslim egg-seller as he ventures into their neighborhood during a curfew to make his customary deliveries. Cries for help and frantic knocking on the front door are followed by the wife’s distraught exclamation at the sight of their blood-spattered wall. In the second scene, Bharatmata [Mother India] mediates a fierce dialogue about citizenship rights in a secular democracy with two men whose attire designates their different religio-communal allegiances. In the third scene, a terrified young woman calling herself Sakina begs to be allowed inside her husband’s house. Her pounding on his door and repeated entreaties for shelter and succor suggest parallels with the first scene. Domestic violence within the private spaces of home and family and a riot, the most public face of communalism, echo each other.
The public debate between the state and representatives of religious communities initiated in scene two continues in scenes four and six. What began as a habitual state inquiry into a communal riot resulting in “a murder on the doorstep of a gentleman’s house in a respectable locality” (Bhattacharya 39) rapidly morphs into an intense, male dominated discussion about the threat posed by women’s rights lobbyists to community identity and survival. The disturbing news of Shahbano’s transgression is debated in the context of potential repercussions for community strength and honor. The khaki clad Hindu and his bearded, fez donning Muslim counterpart spar over an insinuation, by the former, that Shahbano’s actions have raised serious questions about Islamic masculinity. By contrast, Ramachandra’s abandonment and expulsion, from his home and kingdom, of his pregnant wife Sita on account of her rumored infidelity are valorized as proof of the Hindu community’s ancient and famed tradition of successful female social and sexual subordination.

The irony of the khaki clad Hindu’s celebration of the epic hero and chief deity of the Hindutva movement is not lost on the audience. That the play was written and performed amid the consolidation, by the VHP [World Hindu Council], of the Ram Janmabhumi movement for the liberation, from Muslim influence, of the alleged birthplace of Lord Ram in the northern town of Ayodhya renders the irony even more compelling. In their eagerness to assert community machismo by demonstrating their power over their women, the two men end up echoing each other’s idiom. The discourse of mutual provocation that drives majority and minority communalisms, the play emphasizes, is founded on patriarchal control and inscription of women exclusively as custodians of culture and community. And, the state’s rhetoric of

---

69 Demolition of an ancient Babri mosque by Hindu fundamentalists in Ayodhya in December 1992 was a direct result of this consolidation. The basis for the movement was an unsubstantiated claim that the sixteenth century mosque had been built after the destruction of an ancient Hindu temple dedicated to Lord Ram. The issue became the center of fierce political and historical debate and controversy. The demolition sparked off riots and large-scale violence in various parts of the country.
secularism and democracy and its part in preventing violence and upholding order and justice for “all citizens … irrespective of their caste, creed or religion” (Bhattacharya 39) are necessarily motivated by and always consistent with the interests of community-based vote bank politics. The dialogue ends with the state and fundamentalist representatives of religious groups legitimating each other’s authority and reaching a mutually beneficial compromise. Secularism, derived from a static and homogeneous conception of religious identity/community, is thus upheld through the erasure of gender and of the female subject as right-bearing citizen.

The implicit correlation between communalism (public/outside) and domestic violence (private/inside) suggested through the juxtaposition of the fates of the Muslim trader and the divorced Sakina in the early scenes is differently traced in scene five which returns the audience to the home of the Hindu couple introduced in the opening scene. Closely following the allusion to Sita’s exile from home and country as punishment for her transgression of gender norms, this scene reinforces the continuity between the persecution of religious minorities and violence against women. Stage directions hint at the power dynamic between the couple in the very first segment when the wife, from her position on the floor, is seen casting surreptitious glances in her husband’s direction to gauge his mood as he reclines in an armchair. At first, her timid suggestion that they should intervene to save the Muslim egg-seller and her horror at the screams and bloodshed that result are politely, but firmly, disregarded. The husband’s injunction to his wife to stop screaming and his move to shut the window at the end of the first scene may be symbolically read both as a shutting out/denial of the violence on the street and as an attempt to isolate and contain marital violence/oppression within the privacy of the home. The play deconstructs this patriarchal public-private separation by invoking parallelisms between the husband’s assertion, in the first scene, that minorities are “going too far” and “must be taught a
good lesson” by “our boys … with lathis [sticks] and daggers,” (37-8) and his growing aggression toward his wife in scene five. Denying her request to be left alone so that she may mourn the murder of the egg-seller, he threatens bodily harm, as a way of teaching her how a wife ought to behave toward her husband, if she does not do his bidding:

Talking of liberation, are you? Women’s lib? These women have gone above themselves after we have been forbidden more than one wife under Hindu law! Don’t you try and act smart – I’ll strangle you to death! You haven’t been beaten in too long, it seems! (Mimicking) There’s so much blood on our wall! I can make blood flow too, you know! What do you think? (49)

The “women’s voices” (50) sought to be silenced by patriarchal agencies like the state and religious communities intensify in the seventh scene. Sabita and Sakina, Hindu and Muslim, hitherto absent from the debates on secularism and democracy, recognize that the house/nation/homeland belongs to neither. Abandoned by husbands and denied support by the state, they find themselves outsiders knocking on doors and begging entry. At first, fear of bringing disrepute on themselves and their families/communities for a night spent on the streets overrides any concern for personal safety. However, as these modern-day Sitas face each other on stage for the first time, their identities converge and their differences become irrelevant in the context of their recognition of the common struggle in which they are engaged: “Sakina: How can that be? It’s my house. Who was knocking at the door? Sabita or Sakina? You’ve confused me, sister! Maybe that house belongs to neither of us! Maybe this country doesn’t belong to us either! Actually, neither of us seems to have a home, homeland, people of our own, nothing” (54)! In the final scene, a chained, blindfolded and gravely wounded old man whom Sabita instantly recognizes as her egg-seller and Sakina as her Basiruddi chacha [uncle], joins the women as a concluding monologue and choric, background song reaffirm the unity of their oppressions.
In her preface, Bhattacharya notes that for staging *Eto Rakto Keno?*, she chose an all-women cast. She specifically alludes to the fact that, during rehearsals, the girls playing the two husbands were visibly discomfited by the verbal and physical brutality that their roles required of them. This unease, she adds, was also evident in the audience that attended the performances (xix-xx). Bhattacharya herself reads these reactions in terms of the play’s success in “breaching a silence [surrounding issues of marital and communal violence] that was sacrosanct” and forcing in literate, middle class, Bengali audiences a recognition of their complicity in issues from which they ordinarily remain aloof (xviii). She proceeds to speculate briefly on the extent to which the discomfort produced by a propagandist play may translate into genuine awareness of the issues raised therein. However, I think her reference to the effects of role-playing merits further investigation.

*Sachetana’s* deliberate choice of women actors may be understood in terms of a Brechtian dialectics. By generating constant play between the familiar and the unfamiliar, theater, in the epic mode, strives to “transform the spectator into observer, arousing his critical consciousness and capacity for action” (Boal 95). The implication of gender in this process of alienation is especially significant. The aversion experienced by actors and audience alike, to women speaking and acting in ways normally associated with men, i.e., exhibiting ‘inappropriate’ gendered behavior, exposes and challenges the normative and deeply internalized character of masculinity and femininity. In so doing, the strategy denaturalizes what we conventionally assume to be fixed and immutable gender identities/behaviors and renders them ambiguous. The choice of women in aggressively masculine parts thus establishes that hierarchy, founded on inequality between the ‘sexes,’ constitutes and maintains gender. This hierarchy, understood as
underpinning marriage, is repeatedly interrogated throughout the play. I shall return to this point in a moment.

In the same introductory essay, Bhattacharya also observes that *Eto Raktio Keno?* was performed only twice and that even as *Sachetana*’s dramatic productions are being translated and anthologized, the original Bengali script of the play has not been in circulation for several years. 70 Both she and director Madhushree Dutta affirm, however, that far from losing its relevance, the play has become a “full fledged chronology of contemporary times” (Bhattacharya xxv). This view is corroborated by fellow *Sachetana* activist and co-translator Sarmistha Dutta Gupta who contends that the play has acquired renewed significance “in the context of the Gujarat pogrom and with issues like domestic violence against women having entered the public domain” (xxx). 71 However, both playwright and director identify, in their craft, a certain lacuna that inhibited their ability to adequately translate the meanings implicit in the script into performance. Bhattacharya attributes this lack to “flaws” in the initial productions whose failure to capture the “complexity of intentions” in the script deterred any future attempts at staging the play (xvi). Madhushree Dutta, in her director’s note, is a little more specific. She claims that the play has “not yet been produced with its full potential” because she was unable to “work out the on-stage journey from communalism to domestic violence” (xxv).

---

70 During a brief conversation in New Delhi in February 2006, I asked Bhattacharya if the play has been performed since the publication of the anthology. She noted that it had not, and expressed considerable regret at losing her director Madhushree Dutta who has, since moving to Bombay, made a successful transition into documentary filmmaking.

71 The reference to Gujarat concerns the events of spring, 2002. A passenger train carrying many members of right wing Hindu outfits from the disputed Ayodhya site caught fire, burning to death hundreds of people. The VHP and several BJP leaders claimed the Sabarmati Express tragedy as part of a deliberate, Muslim conspiracy. By way of revenge, the BJP government in the state, led by chief minister Narendra Modi, launched a calculated and sustained pogrom against Muslims in the state. In addition to mass murder, the genocide also involved assertions of Hindu supremacy by the marking of Muslim women’s bodies through rape, feticide, forcible conversion, and immolation.
In view of the creators’ discontent and the fact that street theater, as a form, thrives on constant improvisation and reinterpretation, I shall venture to re-site the play by extending its discursive framework within domains at which the script obliquely hints but does not expressly address. In thus pushing the boundaries of the text by “put[ting] it within alien arguments” and reading against the grain, I shall endeavor, to use Gayatri Spivak’s term, to “reconstellate” it (“Literary” 241). As I indicated earlier, violence is the trope which connects communalism and domestic oppression in Why So Much Bloodshed? Hierarchy underwritten by binary gender and an asymmetrical bourgeois, sexual morality predicated on female chastity are adjudged responsible for both. Sita’s dilemma, endlessly repeated in the life stories of thousands of Sabitas and Sakinas, highlights the centrality of women’s sexuality to the production of ‘respectable’ subjectivities which, in turn, undergird dominant constructions of both community and nation. Class, and by extension, religion are foregrounded as the exclusions through which this process of consolidation works but not the production of sexualities as ‘respectable’ and ‘deviant.’ Why So Much Bloodshed? stops just short of extending its interrogation of gender and sexual inequality into an explicit critique of normative sexuality. At one point in the narrative, Sakina observes that had she been literate, her life of humiliating servility and dependence might have been eschewed. The play posits education and economic independence as the means of opting out of marital tyranny. However, this move inevitably results in an erasure of female desire and of the possibility of exploring women’s sexual autonomy – alongside the economic -- outside the framework of compulsory heterosexuality or even heterosexual marriage. And, to the extent that asexuality is offered as the only alternative to marriage, the play implicitly presumes the heterosexuality of its feminist subject.
However, in the penultimate scene which brings Sabita and Sakina together on stage for the first time, the possibility of a feminist ‘sisterhood’ where differences of class and religious affiliation are recognized even as they are sought to be provisionally transcended in the cause of gender rights/justice is articulated:

SAKINA: Talking about maintenance, are you! But you can no longer claim that, sister! Ghosts have no right to survive! Oh, did you think only the Sakinas had to fight for maintenance, not the Sabitas? *Think again, if Sakina is deprived of her rights, can Sabita ever have them?* Can that ever be the case? (Bhattacharya 54, emphasis mine)

The reduction of women, Hindu and Muslim alike, to the status of ghosts upon their rejection by family is evidence of the tenuous nature of their identity within dominant definitions of citizenship. To liberate themselves, women must overcome the invisibility imposed on them via the exclusive mediation, by family, of their autonomy and rights. For, as Sakina avers, if one woman’s rights are denied, all women are enslaved.

Sakina’s interrogation of conventional familial and domestic arrangements, allusion to the intersecting vectors of difference that complicate the issue of women’s self-representation, as well as emphasis on visibility, though devoid of any reference to sexuality, could easily be construed as advocating recognition of lesbian rights. Her emphasis on the interconnectedness of oppressions despite their apparent disparateness echoes the mandate of coalitions like CALERI who frame their focus on lesbian rights as distinct, yet intimately connected, to the “suppression of women’s sexuality in general” (4). For, “if Sakina [gendered minority – religious or sexual] is deprived of her rights, can Sabita [gendered majority – Hindu or embedded in heterosexual matrix] ever have them?”

“Wrench[ing]” Sakina’s words “out of their proper context” thus allows for the resignification and expansion of a nuanced feminist analysis of gender -- in its multiple intersections with class, caste and religion -- into a critique of heteronormativity. (Spivak,
“Literary” 241). It also enables an examination and dismantling of the tacit separation between the women’s movement and struggles of the sexually marginalized in relation to their “proper” domains and objects of inquiry. For, as Judith Butler points out, there is much to be learned from promoting “the kinds of conversations that resist the urge to make territorial claims” by attention to the existence of “rifted grounds” that contest notions of autonomy and undo the “exclusions by which they are instated” (“Against” hypertext version). The next section briefly maps the “rifted grounds” of the sexuality debate in the post-Fire context. The final section focuses on issues of identification, domesticity and desire in select activist literature emerging from groups, mainly in the urban metropolis, involved in raising awareness about same-sex realities. Through a series of close readings, I show how, in their efforts to push the parameters of concerns and engagements within the women’s movement, these writings offer possibilities for a more ‘secularized’ feminism founded on a deconstruction of the heterosexist presumptions currently structuring its inquiries.

“Making Heroes and Heroines of Assassins and Lesbians”72

Toward the end of a personal account of the protest campaign launched against the Shiv Sena’s attacks on the film Fire and its immediate and potential repercussions for the lives and struggles of the sexually marginalized, S.L., a member of the Campaign for Lesbian Rights (CALERI), remarks:

---

72 Reputed journalist, poet and M.P., Pritish Nandy, is reported to have said during a parliamentary session, that while filmmakers (like Mehta) depicting lesbian relationships and playwrights (like Pradeep Dalvi) writing about Gandhi’s assassin Nathuram Godse are entitled to artistic freedom and to their “alternative perspectives,” debating such issues in Parliament is a waste of “valuable national time” and “a disservice to the nation.” He added that such attention also risks “making heroes and heroines of assassins and lesbians.” Widely known as a progressive, this former editor of a popular news magazine advised fellow parliamentarians that “murder and sexual deviation” should be left outside the House which has matters of greater consequence to discuss. He appended that, at best, the women’s wings of political parties could debate lesbianism, if they so wished, but that it should be left out of the realm of mainstream politics. Cited in CALERI 9-10.
We have heard several progressive groups fighting for the rights of the dispossessed, the voiceless, the minorities, calling lesbianism a ‘personal choice.’ We have to work with these groups in the hope that they will examine the unfortunate and demeaning dismissal in those two words. It is homophobia trying to dress itself in liberal drag, and therefore, it is all the more difficult to combat (19).

The passage implicates left-liberal groups, including those affiliated with the women’s movement, in preserving a “conspiracy of silence” (18) within families, neighborhoods, communities and workplaces where lesbians must perforce make their lives. An unquestioned and oppressive social contract based in compulsory and habitual silence, the writer implies, enables the more overt but not entirely unrelated violence of right wing groups like the Shiv Sena. Simultaneously, in recognition of the importance of coalition building at the sites of democratic contest, S.L. also appeals, to these very groups, to broaden existing definitions of ‘minority’ and ‘marginalization’ to include ‘alternative’ sexualities. However, lest this incorporation result in the articulation of certain subjects/economies/desires at the expense, containment and gradual dissipation of others, the article ends with the following quotes from an independent, yet vocal and resolute, group of protestors outside Delhi’s cinema halls in the aftermath of the Shiv Sena’s disruption and vandalism of screenings of Fire. Their resolve alluded to, by S.L., as surprising and yet heartening, helps to conclude the article on a note of cautious optimism, “If this protest is about democratic rights you’ll find enough allies, but unless it is specifically about lesbianism, we will not join” (19).

Much has been said and written about the nature and terms of Right wing opposition to the film, its depiction of sex between women, and to those involved in making it. However, the group’s conditional support of the protests, referenced by S.L., is especially significant in the light of other, mainly left-liberal, reactions to the discussions provoked by the film. I will briefly historicize as well as contextualize the responses of individuals and coalitions involved in
women’s rights struggles both to Mehta’s work and to public debates on lesbianism generated as much by the widespread release of the film as by the censorship it faced.

In response to the Shahbano imbroglio and the wide-ranging discussions it provoked on secularism, religious patriarchies and family/personal law reform, an autonomous but influential women’s group in Bombay drafted a document, in 1995, entitled “Visions of Gender Just Realities.” The FAOW (Forum Against Oppression of Women), conceived as the Forum Against Rape in 1979, and a subsequent constituent of CALERI, regards itself as a critical alternative to as well as watchdog of Left affiliated women’s organizations whose understanding of gender oppression, notwithstanding their recognition of its varied and multiple aspects, as per FAOW members, remains largely economistic. In contrast, the Forum focuses almost exclusively on sexual and domestic violence against women and identifies the ‘family’ as the primary site of women’s subjugation. The paper to which I allude is unique for its appeal to women’s groups nationwide to widen their spotlight on legal reform of family laws to include rights of the sexually marginalized. Gender justice, the document avers, cannot be achieved unless existing definitions of both marriage and family are radically re-envisioned. This entails, among other things, a re-interpretation of marriage, not as a “sacrament” with its principal objective in procreation, but as a registered contract for “companionship and commitment” between “consenting adults of any sex … without any prohibitory degrees.” Furthermore, the paper emphasizes that the dissolution of such contracts should not require “legal proof or reasons” and that either partner should be able to file for divorce on the grounds of “irretrievable breakdown.”

The proposal also clearly specifies that “hetero-relational and homo-relational contracts … be considered at par” and the partners involved in such contracts be accorded “similar rights.”

73 For a detailed study of the relationship between the FAOW and the CPI(M) affiliated Janwadi Mahila Sangathana (JMS) in Bombay, see Raka Ray, Fields of Protest: Women’s Movements in India.
(FAOW 83-88) which are then listed under various categories such as income, assets, maintenance, property, adoption/custody, childcare, etc.

Extracts from the paper, subsequently presented at a workshop on lesbian, gay and bisexual rights in 1997, include reactions of other women’s organizations to FAOW’s suggestion that gender justice vis-à-vis family law reform proceed not just with a view to achieving greater equity within existing institutions but, rather, by challenging the heterosexist presumptions founding them. Among these is a reservation expressed by some groups to FAOW’s proposal that family law reform include same-sex relationships. The objection is raised on the grounds that including the issue of homo-relational realities as part of changes in family laws would “‘discredit’ and jeopardize the broad based support” for the latter (88). The discourse around strategic coalition building is, thus, squarely predicated on a necessary separation between feminist and queer agendas, a position that dominates analogous debates on lesbianism amid the Fire controversy at the end of the decade.

Activist, co-founder and editor of Manushi, a journal about women and society in India, Madhu Kishwar, for instance argues in her disparaging review of the film that by inciting public discourse around the issue of lesbianism, Mehta has, in fact, done “a big disservice to the cause of [Indian] women” (“Naïve” 11). Unlike Hindutva ideologues who claimed that lesbianism was a sign of western decadence and alien to Indian tradition and culture, Kishwar implies that the practice of gender-segregation actually offers spaces for “close emotional bonding” as well as “physical affection” between women, and that homophobia, rather than homosexuality, is western:

Two women friends or female relatives sleeping together in the same bed, hugging, massaging each other’s hair or bodies is seen as a normal occurrence and even encouraged in preference to similar signs of physical affection between men and women. Such physical
affection between women is not ordinarily interpreted as a sure sign or proof of lesbian love. (11)

The opposition between “physical affection” and “lesbian love” in the last sentence is deliberately elusive for it creates a crucial distinction between an acceptable female homosociality, embedded within the heterosexual economy, and homosexuality. In a society which practices gender-segregation, women-only spaces are tolerated, even promoted, over heterosocial ones. However, as Giti Thadani has pointed out, the homosocial space, strictly non-sexual, is encouraged only so as to evolve a heterosexual one within marriage. The obligatory split between “lesbian behavior” and “lesbian identity” implies that the former is permissible, to an extent and often, furtively, “provided the dominant, lived reality is heterosexual” (Thadani 98-99). Kishwar adds that, as a consequence of Mehta’s film, women in India “will feel inhibited in expressing physical fondness for other women for fear of being permanently branded as lesbians” (“Naïve” 11-12). Implied in her construction is a woman/lesbian split in which the former are always, already presumed heterosexual. Moreover, by designating discourse and visibility as threatening to women, Kishwar contradicts her earlier point about homophobia being unknown in Indian culture and society.

Among the spate of responses received by Manushi, to the article, is one that passionately contests Kishwar’s advocacy of silence over speech and her allusions to an indigenous tolerance that will protect and preserve women-only spaces in India:

I find it insulting. It is not about sex in an alley. It is also about sleeping with a same sex partner. It’s about waking up together, about having a life together and not having to lie about it. I am a lesbian woman and I call myself a lesbian even though I neither have a relationship with a woman nor do I seek to have one. I could not reconcile to having such a relationship and having to lie about it, lies necessary to negotiate the tolerance Ms. Kishwar talks about, lies required to keep a job in the manner her acquaintances have told been to keep theirs. There is need for better understanding. There is need for a change in laws. There is need for space to discuss this. (Kishore 3-4).
Kishwar’s rejoinder is published in the same issue as the letters. In a surprising move that unilaterally rubbishes a central feminist principle, one that she and fellow activists in the women’s movement have battled for decades to uphold, she writes:

I have always been puzzled and surprised that most highly educated women respond to my articles only when they deal with issues like sex, marriage, dowry and relationships with men. Over the years, I have written on a variety of other subjects that are important to both women and men such as India’s farm policy, economic reforms, ethnic conflicts, sanitation, health and education. Such articles have hardly ever been subjects of animated debate within women’s groups … However, even the most innocuous of my articles that refers in some way or other to domestic and emotional melodramas and marital or sexual relations evokes a large volume of extremely animated and agitated responses from them. (“Madhu” 6-7).

Kishwar’s perfunctory dismissal of sexuality as belonging to the realm of “domestic and emotional melodramas” and, therefore, subordinate to economic and political affairs of national import replicates the gendered hierarchy of public and private. This stance also informs the work of feminists of a more overtly leftist persuasion. In their review of the film, Mary E. John and Tejaswini Niranjana juxtapose analyses of sexuality against, what they claim, as a more relevant feminism inflected by questions of caste and class. As in Kishwar, the intersecting axes and institutions of power, including, but not limited to caste and class, that regulate sexuality remain unexplored. Sexuality becomes synonymous with “the successful assertion of sexual choice” (John and Niranjana 581). And, by thus reducing sexuality to a matter of personal/individual “choice,” the discourse, inadvertently, echoes Mehta’s own defense of her film as a narrative about “loneliness” and “choices” in which lesbianism is only a “peripheral” theme (581-2). The only difference is that while Mehta, celebrates this vision of freedom, John and Niranjana reject it on the grounds that it cannot be a “sufficient condition” for the emancipation of women (581).

It is the exclusions perpetrated precisely under the guise of this liberal rhetoric of freedom/choice – sexual and artistic – around which protests against the Shiv Sena’s actions
coalesced that S.L., of the Campaign for Lesbian Rights, challenges in her account. She observes:

Some of us were taking great personal risks in holding up those posters in the middle of a sea of candles, in the face of flashing cameras. Interestingly, some of the individuals and groups who had joined in to protest the attack on ‘freedom of speech and expression’ and ‘democratic rights’ were upset and vitriolic about the same freedoms being extended to a minority in a peaceful and democratic public protest. We were severely criticized both before and after: why did we have to be visible, how did we dare to use the word ‘lesbian,’ why were we insisting Fire had anything to do with lesbianism when the filmmaker was herself denying it … (18).

By privatizing the issue of sexuality and recasting protests against the suppression of sexual minorities in terms of arguments against censorship of artists and their creative expressions, filmmakers, women’s groups and the nation as a whole performed a collective act of silencing that CALERI, in its insistence on identity and naming, seeks to reverse.

**CALERI: Toward an Intersectionality Critique**

Crystallizing as a flexible coalition of about thirty-one organizations and several individuals at the close of 1998, CALERI deployed the public discourse triggered by the film Fire to launch a year-long awareness-raising effort to retain as well as expand the recently achieved space for continued debate on lesbianism. Focusing attention primarily on the nation’s capital, activists sought to press forward with their agenda through a series of cultural and educational campaigns. These included leafleting at Delhi’s major universities, hospitals, and legal, administrative and media centers, at busy street intersections and bus-stops; meetings and formal as well as impromptu discussions and workshops; role-playing exercises aimed at deconstructing gender and sexual stereotypes; and distribution of questionnaires and posters problematizing sexuality and prevailing myths about lesbianism.

However, consistent with this chapter’s focus on consciousness-raising and mobilization through narrative and performance, I analyze two street-plays and a short story composed,
adapted, and translated by CALERI members and included in the coalition’s 1999 Citizen’s Report. The plays are in Hindi and the short story, based on writer Vijay Dan Detha’s retelling of a Rajasthani folktale, rendered into Hindi and adapted for the report by a women’s group called Nirantar, also has a brief history of performance. I demonstrate how these texts may be usefully read not only as underscoring the larger mandate of the collective but as, simultaneously, embodying the underlying complexities and differences, in terms of goals, vision, and coalitional and strategic imperatives, of the multiplicity of voices and realities represented therein.

Each play is composed of concise scenes arranged in linear narrative progression, and critically engages CALERI’s accent on speech and visibility. Together, they probe potential consequences of both silence and naming in a society where sexuality, generally a taboo subject, is especially not open to discussion between parents and children, and marriage is presumed the inevitable destiny of every young woman. Tersely titled, Such Bataana Hi Hoga [The Truth Must be Told], the first of the plays centers on the dilemmas and fears of two urban college students struggling with the decision to ‘come out’ to their respective families. Having successively stalled marriage proposals for a few years on the pretext of getting an education, Anju and Sangeeta find themselves at a crossroads and out of excuses as they approach the end of their undergraduate lives. Tired of returning home every day to be confronted by eager and hopeful parents and endless profiles of ‘suitable’ bachelors, they discover that their valorization of freedom and independence as stemming from their single status is no longer an effective barrier against the daily onslaught. More importantly, it proffers no space for envisaging a

74 Ruth Vanita mentions that a play based on the story was performed in New Delhi in the 1970s. Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai eds., Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History. (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 2000) 318. At the time of publication of the 1999 Report, the two street plays had yet to be performed. The document, therefore, provides no information on their reception. I have been unable, till date, to find any records of actual performances although I have reason to believe the plays were performed in Delhi.
meaningful life with each other. The possibility of eloping together is briefly entertained and then dismissed for, as Sangeeta puts it, “Who are we running away from and why? Our work, studies, everything is here. We don’t want to make our lives apart from our families” (CALERI 38, translation mine). The only option then, is to “tell.”

The second play, *Pavan Ban Ud Jaun* [Become the Wind and Fly Away] follows a similar narrative structure, only this time the two women – Kamala and Sakina – belong to different religious communities whereas, in the first play, the characters were divided by class. Composed specifically, as per the brief note preceding the scripts, for performance on the streets for what would be a predominantly male, working class audience, this play historicizes the issue in order to highlight the specific trials and repercussions attendant on women speaking out about their same-sex partnerships. Via allusions to the infamous Leela-Urmila case of 1987, where two women police constables were separately jailed, beaten, and forced to resign from the force for allegedly claiming to have married each other at a local temple, the scene catalogs the difficulties faced by women who dare to speak publicly of their sexuality. Reported through an imaginative re-creation of what begins as a seemingly routine conversation between a male inspector and his deputy, the scene linguistically evokes and reinforces the violence inherent in all police inquiries and generally embodying masculinity in uniform, a concept with which its target audience will, very likely, identify. It also works to prepare and sensitize the audience to the more specific violence – legal, social, sexual, and cultural -- that is about to be unleashed on the two unsuspecting women constables. The chorus, led by a *sutradhar*, picks up the narrative thread and challenges the audience, “Did you see, did you hear Leela and Urmila’s story, did you understand, did you understand …? Speak further [if you dare], of Kamala-Sakina” (41). Individual choric voices acknowledge discrete instances, in different parts of the country, of
social and economic discrimination and deprivation, of sexual harassment, of lives surrounded by hopelessness and despair. And yet, retorts a new voice, despite all these trials, women continue living with one another, with courage and fortitude, a community in the making, a community that we must strengthen in our combined struggle for human rights.

Through conversations between the girls and their parents, both plays mention the rarely spoken but, nonetheless, clearly demarcated social line between female homosociality, actively supported as a precursor to marriage, and its subversive sexual counterpart, which could disrupt the heterosexual matrix and must, therefore, be immediately curbed. In a gender-segregated environment where same-sex friendships clearly outnumber heterosexual ones, the plays suggest, through their delineation of the comfort and camaraderie characteristic of the former, the possibility of translating these interactions into more lasting and significant partnerships. The first play, composed for staging and workshop exercises on college campuses, is especially illuminating in this respect. In the face of stiff parental resistance, Anju makes faltering attempts at explaining her rejection of marriage in terms of her commitment to Sangeeta. Her progressive, trade-unionist father cites companionship as the chief justification for marriage, generously adding that his daughter is free to “choose” a boy from any caste or religion. In agreement with her husband thus far, Anju’s mother suddenly turns on him with uncharacteristic vehemence, revealing that her own marriage, like those of many other housewives has been lonely and far from companionable. With the collapse of the marriage-as-companionship rationale, the father has little alternative but to resort to far more conservative and contentious arguments about custom, lineage and the continuation of the family name, inadvertently locating, as he does so, the sole purpose of marriage in reproduction.
By juxtaposing the father’s radical politics and lifelong commitment to struggles for the rights of Dalits and workers against his unquestioning acceptance of traditional moorings of marriage and family, the play highlights the effacement of sexuality from discussions of subalternity and minority rights. It also hints at the fact that in reducing sexuality, especially non-heteronormative practices, to ‘personal choice’ and ‘pleasure’ afforded by social privilege, left-liberal discourse that emphasizes caste and class inflected socio-economic and political struggles over those involving sexual rights, renders non-existent the ‘lower’ caste or working class lesbian. This understanding of lesbianism as always, already classed, is anticipated and refuted by the presence, in the play, of Sangeeta, the daughter of a factory worker, who must contend with her own family’s peremptory dismissal of Anju as the over-indulged, wild and morally suspect daughter of a rich and non-conformist father.

“If you don’t understand me, who will” (41)? Anju remarks poignantly to her ranting father as she proceeds to expose the hollowness of dominant constructions of the family as affording the individual a space of unconditional love and safety. Confronting her parents and the audience, she relentlessly names the unspoken abuses perpetrated against women, workers and children precisely as the result of a collective social hypocrisy and refusal to disturb the consensual silence that pervades the realm of the sexual. And, in unyoking the necessary correlation between marriage and family as sites of absolute nurture and understanding, she envisages possibilities for alternative imaginings of domesticity as the stage is opened up for audience responses that will carry forward and/or transform the narrative through discussion, debate and assumption, by individual audience members, of the roles of Anju’s parents.

The “double life,” of hypocrisy and unconcern legitimated by routine acts of censorship for which Anju indicts her audience, coincidentally constitutes the original title of Vijay Dan
Detha’s Rajasthani short-story, excerpted in Hindi translation and published in the 1999 Citizen’s Report under the title “Teeja-Beeja” (CALERI 53-6). Prepared by a women’s organization primarily involved in rural education, the story is adapted for distribution as resource material during CALERI’s public meetings. Derived from a north-west Indian folk tale, the plot involves the children of two moneylenders, pledged in marriage to each other by their fathers, even before their birth. In a twist of fate characteristic of folktales, both the children turn out to be girls. A promise made to a friend and greed at the prospect of a handsome dowry combine to induce one moneylender to hide the sex of his child and raise her as a boy. Ignoring his wife’s protests, he sets out to right “nature’s mistake” (53). The normative sex-gender continuum is jettisoned and the ‘girl’ grows up socialized and believing herself to be a ‘boy.’

Many years later, a newly married neighbor who happens to see her bathing realizes the deception. The friend stresses that by persisting in self-delusion, she guarantees herself a miserable and barren future. For, a woman’s desire can be fulfilled only by a man. The warnings are unheeded and the conventional, causal relation of sex-gender-desire remains suspended.

The much-awaited wedding takes place and, as is to be expected, the bride is subject, to some disturbing revelations about her ‘groom.’ Interestingly, the familiar folk or fairy-tale trope of transformation – animal to human, woman to man, or vice versa – that restores ‘normalcy’ by bringing about ‘happy’ (heterosexual) endings is entirely absent from this telling. Initially alarmed at the sight of their two identically formed bodies, the bride’s dismay gives way to compassion when she realizes that her husband has been a lifelong victim of a false parental acquisitiveness and sense of family honor. Brushing aside ‘his’ expressions of regret, she declares that they must now find their own path to freedom. “There is nothing spectacular about the sun rising in the east. If it were to rise in the west, that would be noteworthy,” she comments
obliquely about the pervasiveness of heterosexual unions (54). She then proceeds, with loving care, to dress her ‘groom’ in her own wedding finery. The meticulous visual transformation is accompanied by a ritual act of naming, a proclamation of their new life together, “From today, your name is Beeja and mine is Teeja” (ibid.). The rest of the story explores the ramifications of this conscious and subversive act of seeing and naming as the characters embark on a tentative and traumatic journey of social interaction and self-discovery in their quest for a new domesticity.75

Teeja and Beeja’s declaration of their sexual autonomy is construed, by the villagers, as a slap in the face of masculinity. Evicted from home, family and community but emboldened by their love, the two women wander up a nearby mountain and consummate their union under a lightning-streaked sky as the rain, beating down from thirsty clouds, bears witness to the release and quenching of their desires. Upon awakening from a blissful rest, the lovers find themselves in a forest inhabited by ghosts who guarantee protection and a life free from human interference. Blessed by nature and unhindered by the norms and aspirations of human society, Teeja and Beeja succeed in creating a genuine partnership based on mutual love and understanding. The spirit-world in which they make their home thus stands in sharp contrast to the human world where their love has no name. However, a chance return to their village stirs the desire for human contact and integration. The utopic possibilities afforded by their exile begin to disintegrate as heterosexual society invades their minds and drastically and painfully alters their lives and their love. Their hopes of peaceful coexistence denied, the women ultimately return to the ghost-world to salvage their relationship and live out the rest of their lives.

75 This is the title of Ruth Vanita’s English translation of the story. The original Hindi translation on which Vanita’s translation is based is also titled “Naya Gharwas” or “A New Domesticity.” See, Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai eds., Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History 318.
The coalition’s decision to include this story as a resource for generating discussion on lesbianism and Nirantar’s editorial choices in condensing it with a view to enhancing public accessibility and interest are illuminating in terms of strategic and visionary imperatives and deserve critical elucidation. The rural setting of the story and its origins in an indigenous folk tradition, coupled with the status of its author as a bhasha [regional language] writer familiar with the culture act as deterrents against a unilateral rejection of its portrayal of same-sex realities as a sign of western/urban/modern\textsuperscript{76} decadence without antecedents in this country and as, therefore, inauthentic and irrelevant. Nirantar’s Hindi translation preserves, to a great extent, the imagery and idioms of the Rajasthani folk tradition that Detha skillfully incorporates into his craft. And, once the credibility of both teller and tale are established, Detha’s sensitive and searching exposé of the authoritarian cultural codes that first classify, into acceptable and deviant, and then police sexual behavior, especially of women, to uphold a duplicitous public morality, challenges revivalist arguments about an innately diverse and tolerant Indian culture, with roots in a pre-modern, rural ethos, to which homophobia is alien. By thus deploying the two stereotypes – of a sexually depraved west/modernity and an internally adaptable and varied India – to undermine each other, CALERI successfully uses Detha’s story to emphasize that both homosexuality and homophobia have and continue to coexist in this country, as they do elsewhere.

Further, the narrative allows space for the articulation of female sexual desire, whether within marriage or outside it, in terms that suggest relative autonomy from its conventionally perceived social purpose in reproduction. For instance, the sethani’s [moneylender’s wife] reproachment of her husband for sacrificing their child’s future for profit is explicitly predicated

\textsuperscript{76} The words are often used interchangeably in right wing critiques of lesbianism and Fire as shorthand for that which is not ‘authentically Indian.’
on her concern for her daughter’s sexual well being. In promising his daughter in marriage to another woman and thereby disrupting the continuity of sex-gender-desire, the sethani argues that her husband has willfully consigned two innocents to a life of sexual frustration and denial. The moneylender responds with a wry comment that child widows and the wives of absent or impotent husbands also find ways to cope with their fates. His insinuation about female promiscuity in his wife’s family stills any further objections on her part. However, his reference to a disruptive female sexual agency serves to expose cracks within the seemingly stable and impenetrable nexus of morality and monogamy. Within the larger context of the narrative, it is instructive to read his comment as alluding to the subversive possibilities of deploying female sexual autonomy and agency to deconstruct and transform the very institutions whose consolidation depends on their containment.

Empowered by a love nurtured in the ghost-world, Teeja and Beeja’s return to their village elicits precisely such a yearning for critical assimilation. However, the villagers’ self-absorption, endless anxieties over their property and offspring, petty squabbles and conflicts, barriers and boundaries, prove extremely suffocating. Disgusted, the two women wonder how they endured this hell for so many years and hastily return to their palace in the spirit-realm after leaving a message for Beeja’s mother to visit them. The invitation opens the floodgates for the entry, into the ghost-world, of heterosexual society and the results are devastating.

The narrative tension between the ghost-world, which symbolizes desires and practices rendered invisible by heterosexual society, and the village of humans, veers between the need for contact and belonging, on the one hand, and, on the other, total severance and isolation. In this connection, Nirantar’s editorial considerations in adapting Detha’s story for public circulation as part of CALERI’s campaign are especially revealing. The condensed story deviates slightly from
the original version and, as I shall demonstrate, the editorial elisions and interpretations offer further insights into ideological and strategic positions, objectives and limitations of the collective, and of the factions comprising it (Detha 3-35).77

The women’s visit to their native village paradoxically invokes revulsion and the desire for continued dialogue. This dualism, echoed in Detha’s title, is reiterated in his opening invocation to “Eros, the formless one” to bless each of us with “two lives” (Detha 3).78 In the original story, the visit is initiated by the ghost-chieftain who reminds Teeja and Beeja of the world they have left behind and, in their singular absorption with each other, overlooked, but which has not forgotten them. Even though the spirit-world, a gynocentric space forbidden to men, affords safety in seclusion, the narrative hints that this exclusive, ghettoized existence is provisional, vulnerable, and, therefore, to an extent, illusory. Marginalization can be countered only through a process of continual negotiation with the objective of effecting shifts, however minimal, in the workings of power that constitute and separate the ‘normal’ from the ‘perverse.’ For isolation, which amounts to self-censorship, ultimately spells obliteration. At the very end of the telling, as evidence of his fidelity to his sources, the narrator reveals his gender identity, adding that his visit to the remote sanctuary of women was made possible by an express invitation from Teeja who dictated the story in her own words. Although absent from Nirantar’s condensed version, it is possible to read this final act of disclosure as affirming both speech/telling and the value, despite inevitable risks of co-optation and misinterpretation, of sustained critical interaction with dominant society to build solidarity and expand coalitional possibilities.

77 My references to the complete story are taken from Ruth Vanita’s English translation of Detha’s work. Her translations are from Hindi which, she emphasizes, is in the same script as and approximates, very closely, the original Rajasthani.

78 The re-titled and condensed Nirantar version does not contain the invocation.
However, within the framework of the story, the impetus toward assimilation ultimately fails as the incursion of masculinity fortified by the gender normativity of heterosexual society corrupts and very nearly destroys a relationship fostered, by the two women, under the aegis of their spectral guardians. The visit, to their reclusive palace-home, of her mother and cousin, re-awakens Beeja’s guilt for a marriage based in deception. Convinced that Teeja’s happiness can be secured only within a heterosexual arrangement that holds the promise of progeny, she appeals to the ghost-chieftain to transform her into a ‘real’ man. In Detha’s telling, the presumed social link between maleness (sex) and masculinity (gender) produces a dramatic alteration in Beeja’s personality. Her sex-change is accompanied by a growing consciousness of her own superiority within a relationship founded on binary and hierarchical gender. Goaded by this new knowledge, Beeja perpetrates repeated acts of verbal, physical and sexual violence against ‘her’ partner. Ultimately, introspection, memory and supernatural intervention enable another reversal that returns the women to their former state of bliss, albeit in the cloistered world of spirits into which “the creature named man dare not venture” (34).

Masculinity as socially sanctioned violence and sexuality as oriented toward reproduction constitute the twin imperatives around which Detha’s critique of heterosexuality revolves. The cousin’s woeful tale of domestic and sexual abuse involving an impotent husband and his dissolute male relatives acts as a foil to the egalitarian partnership evolved by Teeja and Beeja in the absence of gender regulatory codes. However, the cousin’s appeal to the ghost-chieftain for redress within normative heterosexual arrangements translates perforce into restoration of male potency and the fulfillment of the reproductive function. Her request granted, she returns to her family and, despite the protagonists’ continued curiosity about her prospects, neither they nor the reader hears from her again. Her entrenchment within the heterosexual matrix makes her story
irrelevant in Detha’s scheme, except in terms of its adverse influence on the lives of the two central characters. Here, Nirantar’s interpretive adaptation deviates from its source text. In Detha’s story, Beeja’s emulation of normative gender through her assumption of the masculine role results in [marital] rape and forcible impregnation of Teeja. Recurrent images of darkness, silence, and subjugation appear in stark contrast to an erstwhile togetherness made possible by light/sight, communication and empathy. Nirantar’s condensed version of the story alludes to Beeja’s physical violation. However, its connection to and internal coherence, in Detha’s narrative, with reproduction is elided. In the original story, Teeja’s sexual subjugation, which results in an undesirable pregnancy, recalls and renders poignant her earlier confidence that their joint assertion of sexual autonomy will “pull up by the roots,” the “creeper” that entwines sexuality and reproduction (24, emphasis mine). Thus, in the complete version of the story, the final act of transformation which concludes the telling and produces a ‘happy’ ending underscores this separation in absolute and unambiguous terms, “Thanks to the ghost-chieftain’s magic, not only the filthy seed of man, but Teeja’s womb also burnt up for ever. The creature named man dare not venture within a distance of twenty-four and twenty-four, a total of forty-eight miles around that place” (35).

Although the condensed translation retains the overall spirit of Detha’s story, Nirantar’s editorial omissions produce a variation in emphasis that reveals both coalitional contingencies and objectives as well as differences in analytical perspective. In the longer version, the structural, plot-level figuration of masculinity in terms of embodied violence as fundamental to heterosexuality is reiterated several times in the course of the narrative. One of these instances, described in some detail but expunged from the condensed version, involves Teeja and Beeja erecting a male scarecrow to mock the villagers just prior to their exile. Enraged by the
The equation of heterosexuality with masculine violence, in Detha’s narrative, casts women within dominant heterosexual relationships as invariably passive and helpless. Moreover, by identifying sexual agency/pleasure as necessarily non-reproductive at the end of the narrative, the tale implies a radical break from the practices and concerns of mainstream society, thereby marking as futile any and all struggles for equality and/or inclusion. Nirantar’s commitment toward empowerment, through education and insertion into the mainstream, of rural women, and CALERI’s investment in forging alliances through sustained dialogue, both within women’s movements and in the public domain, render it difficult to sustain Detha’s more intractable position. Thus, the expurgated version, while endorsing the broad strokes of Detha’s critique of heteronormativity, emphasizes the integrationist impulses of the story over aspects liable to alienate a diverse audience or produce a discursive and strategic impasse in efforts at a collaborative, co-transactional politics. As the introduction to the 1999 CALERI Report stresses, “The pieces offer many different perspectives on lesbian rights, some divergent or even in conflict with each other, but the purpose of this report, like the purpose of the Campaign, is to try to create a space for open debate, where we can all talk about advancing the cause in our own ways” (4).

**Conclusion**

Included in the CALERI Report is a brief section on the communications and feedback received, from various quarters, at the conclusion of the Campaign and their implications for the future of the coalition. Today, the collective no longer exists. But, many of the groups that...
comprised the Campaign for Lesbian Rights continue to operate in different capacities in New Delhi and other cities across India.

However, while the *Fire* controversy was raging in the late nineties, another domain witnessed change. The University of Delhi revised its syllabus for undergraduate students majoring in English. The process of overhauling a monolithic curriculum, studied across forty-odd colleges for nearly two decades, involved several months of intensive seminars, meetings and negotiations between college and university level faculty. In what can only be described as a token but, nonetheless significant, gesture influenced, no doubt, by the social climate, sexuality, especially non-normative practices, was sought to be introduced as a vector of analysis within classroom discussions of gender. Accordingly, the Indian Literature paper drafted for study by first year students includes a short-story titled “Lihaaf” [The Quilt] by the early twentieth-century Urdu writer Ismat Chugtai. Although some pieces in the prescribed anthology of poems and short stories deal with sexuality, Chugtai’s is the only text which represents a same-sex relationship.79

When first introduced, the provocation to discourse facilitated by *Fire* and the prolonged controversy it generated on a host of issues offered a ready frame of reference for initiating classroom discussion on alternative sexualities. Five years later, as I return to Delhi to teach the paper to middle class women students schooled, for the most part, in the Hindu right’s gendered and family-centered *dharmapatni* model, I find my task, at once, easier and much more challenging.80 At one level, pop cultural references to non-heternormative practices have become

---

79 Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* is the only other text, in the curriculum, with allusions to same-sex desire. Of the nine papers to be studied in three years, this text is included in an optional “Women’s Writing” paper to be studied in the third year.

80 The term may be loosely translated as ‘good wife’ although the Sanskrit word *dharm* designates both tradition (rooted in culture and religion) and ethics. I borrow the reference from Basu, et al, who use it in connection with the
fairly commonplace owing to the impact of cinema and satellite television. However, the stereotypes and homophobia underlying many of these representations are rarely subjected, in mass media, to serious examination or critique. But, the outcome of every pedagogical encounter, be it street theater or a classroom exercise, is the product of many complex determinants and one hopes that the discursive space opened up by cultural initiatives like CALERI’s will continue to proliferate along the multiple axes and institutions of “public culture.”

ideology and propagandist activities of the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti, the women’s cultural wing of the Hindu right. Tapan Basu, et al. Khaki Shorts, Saffron Flags. 41-42.

81 The term is used by Appadurai and Breckenridge to designate, in the contemporary Indian context, a “zone of cultural debate” that “involves the overlap and interpenetration of diverse modes and sites of cosmopolitan experience.” See, Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, “Public Modernity in India.” Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World. Ed., Carol A. Breckenridge. (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1995) 1-20.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

Reflecting on a post-9/11 world structured around routine exchanges of violence, where war and bigotry are normalized by different stakeholders in defense of spurious freedoms, author Hanif Kureishi observes that ordinary citizens everywhere experience a “lack of information and moral orientation” (“Arduous” hypertext version). He appends that as “liberalism” and “belief,” increasingly and irrevocably juxtaposed, are deployed by governments and/or religious extremists to designate primordial ethnic, racial, and civilizational attributes, mass murder of proximate or distant others becomes a “useful and important moral option in the world” (ibid.). Under these circumstances, he asserts that, “… the only patriotism possible is one that refuses the banality of taking either side, and continues the arduous conversation. That is why we have literature, the theatre, newspapers - a culture, in other words” (ibid.).

Through a contextualized enactment of texts that unsettle or, at least, nuance the dualisms pitting the ‘liberal’ against the ‘religious’ and/or the ‘communitarian’ in contemporary articulations about culture and democracy that form the object of Kureshi’s critique, my dissertation participates in the urgent dialogue to which he alludes. As I argue in preceding chapters of this study, in the public domain in India, the trope through which this interrogative and exegetical function may be performed is the secular. Reconfigured as minority critique with social justice as its objective, the secular has the potential to negotiate, even as it exceeds, its supposed relational dichotomy with both communalism and religion. Simultaneously, in its recognition of the emergence and proliferation, in the public sphere, of “new diversities,” it enables a re-envisioning of community and belonging through a persistent interruption and transformation of received notions of nationalism and citizenship (Bharucha, Cultural Practice 123).
In 1999, an unsigned article appeared in the Organizer, the widely circulated weekly journal of the Hindu Right. Likely written, by an in-house journalist, primarily in response to the controversy surrounding Deepa Mehta’s film Fire, the piece was evocatively titled “Shabana’s Swear, Rabri’s Roar and Teresa’s Terror? The Three Which Sustain Secularism” (8). On the surface, the article amounts to no more than a tirade against secularism as instituted by the Congress Party. However, in the misogynist vocabulary of the author, this flawed Congress vision is embodied by three women: Shabana Azmi, well known actress, activist, Congress Party member of Parliament, and a Muslim, in the headlines for her portrayal of a lesbian in Mehta’s film; Rabri Devi, sometime chief minister of the state of Bihar, better known (and ridiculed) as the wife of wily and corrupt, but immensely popular ‘lower’ caste politician Lalu Yadav; and Mother Teresa whose legacy, along with that of the brutally murdered missionary Graham Staines, the RSS made the subject of intense public debate, in 1999, on the explosive issue of religious conversions, and whether the constitutional provision of freedom of religion should include the right to proselytize and convert.

The article, which exemplifies the widely accepted vision of the RSS, thus equates secularism with women and homosexuals, ‘lower’ castes, Islam and Christianity, all deemed constituencies of the impotent Congress Party. By contrast, the majoritarian Hindu nation emerges as masculine, upper caste, heterosexual and virile. This is Hindutva in its ‘pure’ ideological form. However, subject to the contingencies of the moment, these ‘others’ are selectively co-opted into the fold and/or pitted against one another, thus exemplifying what Romila Thapar refers to as the “syndication” of the Hindu Right (qtd. in Ahmad 17-18).

The article is only one of numerous such examples, in the public domain, of a rhetoric that, in opposing a sterile secularism to a potent Hinduism, results in the systematic ‘othering’ of
religious, caste and sexual minorities. I cite the article here in order to reiterate why rethinking secularism, as a viable alternative to an overt or implicit Hindu nationalism, necessitates a deconstructive understanding of the formative Congress vision of the secular nation, why its hegemony remained largely unchallenged for over three decades after independence, and what changed in the late seventies and early eighties. I make this point partly in the context of recent literary scholarship on communalism. The past two decades have seen the production of a number of dissertations that either focus exclusively on “Partition literature” or use 1947 and Hindu-Muslim clashes as the primary analytical lens for examining Hindu nationalism in its present form. While it must be acknowledged that there are important links between communalism and colonialism/Partition, I assert, throughout this project, that communalism in its most recent avatar cannot be understood in terms of religious conflict/difference alone and, more importantly, without specific attention to social and political culture since the mid-nineteen seventies.

Theorists like Nandy, Chatterjee, Bilgrami, Bhargava and Fraser, whose work critically informs my own, attempt, in different ways, to grapple with the vexed question of how, on what site(s), and under what conditions diverse interest groups may be persuaded to enter into intra- and inter-community/public dialogue towards evolving more fluid and heterogeneous conceptions of identity and citizenship. They variously invoke the “substantive … commitments of … communities” (Bilgrami 394), the “accountability of democratic decision-making” (Fraser 91), “publicly deployed reason” (Bhargava 499) and “sovereignty … against governmentality” on an intra-community site (Chatterjee, “Secularism” 372), to explore how deliberation founded on mutually acceptable standards and outcomes may be ensured. This brings me to my sources. The narratives I examine offer, through individualized and personalized enactments, crucial
critiques and insights into the complex ways in which this difficult public dialogue may be initiated and sustained. The performative aspects of literature and theater, then, allow us to envision how the secular may be forged toward the achievement of diversity, democracy and peaceful (co-)existence.

An important domain of investigation on the secular that remains marginal to my dissertation is cinema. In a country where the achievement of total literacy continues to be a challenge, where the visual media (film and television) has significantly greater impact on public opinion than the written word, and which has a vast and vibrant film industry, I recognize that this is a crucial component of civic culture. However, the sheer breadth and complexity of the discursive arena of Indian cinema, my own lack of training in film theory and analysis that results in a propensity to read filmic texts as I would any other printed narrative, and the growing presence of scholars currently engaged in meticulous and multifaceted inquiries into South Asian cinema comprise some of my reasons for not including a discussion of film in this study.

I concluded the previous chapter with a brief allusion to pedagogical practice. This is another dimension of the secular that remains unexplored in my dissertation despite constituting its unconscious frame of reference, inflecting my textual and interpretive choices in myriad ways. My own primary critical focus on the relations between secularism and ‘minority’ disallow a comprehensive analysis of pedagogy in this study. However, having practiced literary and cultural criticism in undergraduate classrooms in India and the United States for over a decade, I am persuaded that the task of fostering a meaningful skepticism about the world and its texts has acquired a new urgency in the embattled political and cultural climate of our times. And, that despite growing constraints on academic resources, autonomy and eclecticism, we must persist in the self-reflexive task of exploring new avenues of teaching and learning toward transforming
the literature classroom into what Spivak eloquently refers to as a “staged battleground of epistemes” (“Burden” 299). I will conclude, therefore, by briefly addressing, via the writings of Spivak and Said, the question of “secular criticism” a concept that, even as it undergirds my project in method and purpose, proffers crucial elements for a transformative literary pedagogy.

Said presents his most detailed exposé of the concept of “secular criticism,” an idea that recurs frequently in his critical oeuvre, in an introductory essay to The World, the Text and the Critic. Used in conjunction with phrases like “critical consciousness” (5) and “oppositional criticism” (29) and sharply distinguished from “religious criticism” (290) which serves as the title of his conclusion, the term is offered as an explanation of his own analytical framework and technique for the book as well as more generally, as a theoretical and moral imperative for the literary critic and public intellectual.

Beginning from the position that “texts are worldly, and to some degree they are events” that form “a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted” (4), Said argues for a critical practice marked by a persistent curiosity about the relationship between the text and the world, where “textuality” signals an affirmation rather than displacement of histories of social and cultural production, interpretation and transmission. In other words, secular criticism is “always situated… skeptical … and reflectively open to its own failings” (26-27). Additionally, his argument for a historically embedded and socially engaged literary and pedagogical practice that enables endless interrogation of “the various official idols venerated by culture and by systems” (290) of authority that include but are not limited to religion, is underscored by a conviction about appeals to thought, explanation, debate and consensus that constitute potential sites of civic resistance and heterogeneity.
Pedagogical encounters in the literature classroom could provide a training ground for resignifying the inherent heterogeneity and resistance that Said attributes to civic spaces toward oppositional acts and intentions. Located on the cusp of public and private, I think that the classroom is, at once, part of the volatile and fragmented public sphere that Bharucha invokes in his work, and simultaneously a relatively sheltered space where opinions and arguments may be generated without too great a fear of reprisal. In this sense, it is also a culture always in-the-making, explosive and vulnerable to diverse and sometimes conflicting influences, yet potentially dynamic. It, therefore, offers, in my view, an incipient circuit for the constitution of a secular ethic and practice. For each classroom encounter is a performative act whose singularity lies in its endless repetition. Pedagogical interactions, like the texts that form their objects of study will, one hopes, produce students “capable of countersigning and saying ‘yes’ in a committed and lucid way” (Derrida 74). For, as Spivak reminds us, literature, through its rhetoricity, “buys [our] assent in an almost clandestine way and therefore it is an excellent instrument for a slow transformation of the mind. For good or for ill. As a medicine or as poison, perhaps always a bit of both” (“Burden” 278). And, “this ‘yes’ is also an inaugural performance” that even as it constitutes the subject, could lead to a groundswell of supplementary iterations both within and outside the space of the classroom (Derrida 74).82

82 Spivak argues that reader alienation is “a poison and a medicine, a base upon which both elitism and critique can be built (“Burden” 278). By way of explication of the ways that this “alienating consent” (ibid.) operates, she offers the evocative analogy of “religion” thrown into the potential sign-system of “citizenship” as concept and metaphor that wins the assent of the young woman [possibly a student of English literature] whose class-family- pravritti [inclination] insert her into the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti or the subordinate women’s wing of the all male and hypermasculinist preserve of Hindu cultural nationalism (279). Spivak’s startling juxtaposition of two forms of alienated cultural assent by which the subjectivity of the young, middle class, Hindu woman in urban India – who also dominates the undergraduate English classroom – is constituted, is underpinned by an understanding of this “violating enablement” (282) as a site of intervention/ transformation, “as a medicine or as poison, perhaps always a bit of both” (278).
LIST OF REFERENCES


---. “‘Seeing’ the State in India.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, (March 12, 2005): 1033-1039.


---. “Beyond the Nation? Or Within.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 4-11, 1997: 30-34.


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Anuradha Ramanujan received her BA from Madras University, and her MA and MPhil from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. A lecturer in English at Janki Devi Memorial College, University of Delhi, since 1995, she will return to India and to her job upon completion of her doctorate at the University of Florida. A keen advocate for animal rights who might have been a veterinarian had science classes in high school not scared her off, she has volunteered, in different capacities, at shelters in Gainesville and Delhi. She hopes, in the not-too-distant future, to find a meaningful way of integrating her academic pursuits with her commitment to improving the lives of animals.