

**Annabhau Sathe's Life and Work: From Marx to Ambedkar**

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## Declaration By The Candidate

This dissertation titled **Annabhau Sathe's Life and Work: From Marx to Ambedkar**, submitted by me to the Centre of Linguistics and English, School of Language, Literature, and Cultural Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of Master of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or full, for any other degree or diploma of any university/institution.



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## CHAPTER I

## Introducing Annabhau Sathe

*“The cracked vessel on a three-stone makeshift fire place under a tree and the Dalit that cooks for his two children and wife may appear pathetic. But this Dalit’s will to survive is rich, phenomenal, heroic. His faith and relation to his family structure is undiminished, unshaken. Capitalism has shoved his family under this tree. Observe this, search for its causes. The need of the hour is to understand why this Dalit appears pathetic. And to cautiously render this in writing- because every move society makes is linked and powered by the Dalit.*

*This earth is not balanced precariously on the Shaysh Nag’s hood, but rests secure in the Dalit’s and worker’s hands. This Dalit’s life is like the birth of a fresh spring from a mountain’s rocky peaks. Go close. Look. And then write. For Tukaram’s truth still holds: To understand a people you must live with them. Writings on Dalits must be committed to them. “You are not slaves. This world is in your Hands.” Let them know this. Strive to improve their lives.*

*To do this the author must live with his people. The artist that lives with the people is the artist the people stand by. The author who turns his back on people will find that literature has turned her back on him. As every artist knows, art is like the third eye that pierces the world and incinerates all myths. This eye must always be alert and must always see for the people”<sup>1</sup>.*

Annabhau Sathe was born on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1920 in a village called Wategaon in Satara District, Western Maharashtra. He was born in the Mang community (a Dalit community in Maharashtra). His mother’s name was Walabai and father’s was Bhau. As is the case of most people born in penury, Annabhau doesn’t have a recorded history of his early days. No childhood photographs, no medical records, no report cards. The story of his early life is preserved only in anecdotes and through memories of those who knew him. It is difficult therefore, to trace an objective history of his early life. However, memory and anecdote are as reflective of a person’s life as photographs or diaries are.

This introduction to his life will therefore not just be a chronological sequencing of the major achievements in Annabhau Sathe’s life. It shall try and re-invent the journey and

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<sup>1</sup> Arjun Dangle (Ed.) *Lokshahir Annabhau Sathe* (Mumbai: Secretary, Maharashtra Board of Education and Culture, 1998) p 656. (From the inaugural speech of the first Dalit Sahitya Samelan in 1958 in Konkan quoted in translation of Marathi speech into English is mine).

transformation of a young uneducated man, working in a Bombay labor camp with his father to a prolific Dalit author working in the Marxist-Amberkerite movement as a Dalit activist.

Before discussing Annabhau Sathe and his work in detail, I will like to explain why I have chosen to write my dissertation on Annabhau Sathe. Annabhau Sathe was not only a literary figure but was also a political and cultural theory maker as well as an activist in Maharashtra. Annabhau Sathe was not a typical academic writer but his pen analyzed and reflected the day to day realities and social interaction that made up his life as an activist. I hope this work would in part serve as an intellectual biography of Annabhau Sathe.

He was a leading writer of the Dalit literary movement with a considerable standing in Maharashtra that is comparable to that of Ambedkar and Mahatma Phule. Yet no intellectual critique of any standing has been done on his work. No Dalit or non-Dalit writer has ever tried to expand Annabhau's idiom or develop his literary expressions.

On compiling together Annabhau's brief life-sketch I have drawn from the introduction of *Lokshahir Annabhau Sathe* edited by Arjun Dangle.<sup>2</sup> Arjun Dangle lived in the Matunga labour camp as a young boy when Annabhau was living, working and writing in the camp. Dangle's lucid and personal descriptions of Annabhau have helped immensely in re-creating Annabhau's youth and early adulthood.

*Annabhau in Memory*<sup>3</sup> by Baburao Gurav has also been instrumental in my understanding of Annabhau as a person. *Annabhau in Memory* is considered the most authoritative written work on Annabhau. A card-holding member of the Communist Party of India, Gurav's work allows us insights of his friendship with him and the manner in which the Communist Party perceived Annabhau.

Annabhau managed to educate himself up to class four before circumstances forced him to abandon his formal education.<sup>4</sup> Soon after, he walked several hundred kilometers from Wategaon to Bombay with his father in search of work. His journey ended in Matunga labor camp where he toiled with his father. It was here he passed through adolescence and labored his way into manhood. It was also here that he gained and sharpened the intellectual and philosophical tools with which he would analyze the world.

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<sup>2</sup> Arjun Dangle (Ed) *Lokshir Annabhau Sathe*, Mumbai: Secretary, Maharashtra Board of Education and Culture, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Baburao Gurav, *Annabhau in Memory* (Mumbai: Lokvangmay Graha Publication, 1989)

<sup>4</sup> One such anecdote is with regards to Annabhau's brief experience in school. It is said (time and again in speeches about Annabhau) that the first time he attended school he was put straight in class fourth. Seated in the last row, he was asked to stand and answer a question. Being unable to do so he attracted the ire of his teacher, who threw a cane at him. Unable to understand this question, Annabhau answered by throwing a stone at his teacher. That was the last time he went to school.

Annabhau Sathe was not born into an existing tradition of knowledge; neither did the state provide him with one. He approached the world without the intellectual framework and clarity necessary for any social and political analysis. The knowledge tradition that he inherited from his family and his immediate social surrounding was that of suffering and hardship. By caste his family has *Dholka* and *Tuntuna* (the instrument that is used in *Tamasha* performances) and it was this art of *Tamasha* (farce) that was his intellectual inheritance.

Matunga labor camp is known today as Lokmanya Tilak Hospital. The Matunga camp was inhabited mainly by immigrants from the underdeveloped and poverty-stricken Western Maharashtra region. They were mostly employed in menial jobs by the municipality or in Bombay's booming and exploitative cotton mills or in the godowns of large factories.

Annabhau spent his youth in Kalyan, filling coals into sacks, bringing huge bundles of clothes on his back to washermen and taking them back, swept the grounds of the Morbagh factory and finally rising to be a supervisor of sweepers because he was a good sweeper. Annabhau was always calling himself a frontline cadre of the Communist Party. He saw himself as, as indeed he was, a poet-activist who roamed in towns and villages giving performances. The Labour Restaurant, was one of the mainstays of the social and political life of the camp. It was almost a second home for activists of all political parties and tired laborers. Opposite the Labour Restaurant was a signboard advertising "Estrola Batteries". Next to this was Annabhau's hut.

The Ambedkarite movement was giving tone to Dalit voices and the movement was picking up pace. But in Bombay's slums, particularly, the Leftist cadre commanded much support among the industrial labor. At that time, some Marxist activists were organizing an intense and influential discussion and study circle among the laborers at the Labor Restaurant.<sup>5</sup> K. M. Salve, Shankar Narayan Pagare, R. B. More, Vishram Gangurde, and Tukaram Surtape were some of the more prominent of the group's participants.

Baburao Bagul, eminent Dalit activist-writer, tells of how the camp was infested with mosquitoes. Annabhau composed an impromptu satire on the plague. He narrated the satire a couple of times around the camp. His talent was recognized appreciated and encouraged by those around him. P. B. Rangnekar, also a resident of the camp and an official of the Rental Office of the camp, would regularly enquire if Annabhau had composed any more gems. His

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<sup>5</sup> At that time (c. 1936), Ambedkar's Schedule Caste Federation and the Communist Party both attracted large numbers of Mahar and Mang cadres. This Marxist-Ambedkerite dialectic runs through the life of Annabhau and also among all Dalits of his time.



reputation slowly grew. Annabhau shifted to the slums around Matunga railway tracks, with his two sisters and brother Shankar Sathe. The Communist Party arranged for a shanty in which Annabhau could write.

Hari Jadhav remembers how Pagare used to needle and cajole Annabhau to write songs and poems and used to promise him five rupees if he wrote a song and a shirt if he wrote a farcical play. It was one such five-rupee that worked as his muse for *Pratham Mayabhucha Charani*, a song that gained huge popularity in the Unified Maharashtra Movement. It was the promise of one such shirt that resulted in the writing of *Aklechi Ghost*.

On the terrace of Dalwi Building, the Communist Party headquarters in Parle, Annabhau recited his works for a select group invited by Pagare. Among those present were Rangadhar Adhikari, B. T. Ranadhive and P. C. Joshi. It was here that a conscious decision was made to make use of Annabhau's literary talent to further party interests. Following this recital, Annabhau's story moves out of the private domain of memory and anecdote and into the public sphere.

In 1942 following the severe drought that ravaged West Bengal, the Indian Performing Theatre Association (IPTA) organized a programme to raise funds for the drought affected. It was for this performance that Annabhau composed *Bangalchi Hak*, a povada that became very famous in the Bombay theatre circuit at the time.

In the year of 1944, Annabhau Sathe, Amar Saikh and Gavankar formed a group called "*Lal Bhavta Kala Pathak*" in Titwala at the "Peasant Conference". The *Sathyashodhak Jalse* was the leading '*kalapathak*' (cultural troupe) of the left movement. The *Jalse* reached out to the people through songs in the local idiom. It reported each step of the left movement and presented analysis and comment on social realities in an accessible manner. Its success was impressive and the *Jalse* built a solid reputation among the people. The *Jalse* addressed an important need of the time as the movement did not have its own newspapers and was vulnerable to the mainstream press. The mainstream press had a tendency of undermining (sometimes even ridiculing) the leftist and Ambedkari movement. It stands to reason that the *Jalse* not only inspired the *Lal Bhavta Kala Pathak* but also was a determining factor behind Annabhau's choice of the peoples' arts (street plays, *povadas*, farces, etc) as his medium of choice. IPTA's role in inspiring the *Lal Bhavta Kala Pathak* was also considerable. In fact, the *Lal Bhavta Kala Pathak* maintained close ties with IPTA throughout.

*Duniyachi daulat sari*, a racy inspirational song on peasant production, was the rage in the 1950s and 60s and was even picturised in Marathi films of the time. In 1961, the Communist Party organized a tour of Russia. The group consisted of lawyers, doctors,

intellectuals and Annabhau Sathe. Mothers, wives and friends came to see all the other members of the group off at the airport. The workers of Bombay came to see Annabhau off. As he was leaving, they asked him to go to Russia and see all the slums and come back and tell them about it. When in Russia, the members were asked what they wanted to see while they were here. Some wanted to see the Kremlin, others the Moscow Museum. Annabhau told his guide he wanted to walk on the pavements and see the people. He was already famous in Russia as the Russian translations of his *povada Stalingradcha Povada* and short story *Khapryachor* had been a huge success. The trip inspired the writing of a travelogue that helped further global proletariat consciousness.

Annabhau's activism was not limited to the artistic realm. He was an excellent organizer of people and a mass leader in his own right. His egalitarian emancipatory discourse appealed immensely to the people. His close links and understanding of the harsh realities of Dalit and working class life gave his activism and leadership respect and legitimacy. In 1947, on the eve of Indian Independence, Annabhau led a massive rally of workers bearing black flags. The march condemned the impending independence as false and slogans brought to light the plight of workers and Dalits.

Annabhau Sathe struggled along with the mill workers both as a poet and as an activist. Annabhau Sathe was also involved in fighting for the rights of agricultural labor. His intellectual work contributed to and drew inspiration from anti-class philosophy and anti-caste movement. He also provided the cultural leadership on the Unified Maharashtra movement. The Marathi working classes as well as the Marathi elite were propelling the movement for Unified Maharashtra at the time. Thus two clearly different strands of leadership arose. Dange, S. M. Joshi, Acharya P. K. Athre who promoted the movement in urban areas especially Bombay were from the dominant caste and Annabhau Sathe, Amar Saikh, Gavankar, Dadashab Gaikwad, Nana Patil who campaigned in rural areas were from lower strata. This division had hardly received any intellectual attention even though it formed a crucial moment in his life as is evident from *povadas* like *Maharashtrachi Parmpara*, *Ekjuticha Neta*, *Mumbaichi Lavni* etc.

Ambedkar was also a major influence on Annabhau. The responsibility he felt towards the Ambedkari philosophy and movement could be seen in the *povada Jag badal galuni ghauv: Sanguna gele maje Bhimrao* (Change the world with a hammer stroke, Bhimrao Said to me). However, he was neither given his due by the upper caste leadership of the Communist Party or by the faction-ridden anti-caste movement.

Seven films<sup>6</sup> have been adapted from his works. Of Annabhau's work, 32 novels, four plays, a travelogue, 12 farcical pieces, 13 collections of short stories and 11 *povadas* have been published in Marathi. Annabhau Sathe died of starvation in 1970<sup>7</sup>. It is said that he had not eaten for many days and his death was only known when the stench of his rotting corpse reached his neighbors. His son-in-law cuts grass to support Annabhau's granddaughter who cannot afford to go to school.

When Annabhau started writing in the middle of the Twentieth Century, novels, short stories and plays were being written mainly by the upper-caste elite, the inheritors of the Indian Renaissance. Although he did not possess the literary surplus that stemmed from this cultural capital, Annabhau was a prolific writer. However his lack of cultural capital also led to the relative lack of appreciation and recognition (in terms of critical discussion, in terms of publication and in terms of his work never being translated into the dominant language – English). His approach was not philosophical or academic but it was revolutionary, demanding changes, not evoking imagery. His work was distinct from that which was being written by the middle class. If one tries to distill a philosophy underlying his work it is one of action, constantly moving resistance which comes from his interaction with his reality.

In the writings of middle class writers, the Dalits and other impoverished characters were made to surrender to the problems facing them. But Annabhau's characters make a complete break with their surroundings. They question and decimate oppressive links and carry with them immense emancipatory appeal. His *povadas* and one-act plays were focused on immediate reality and issues of his time and caste dialectics. His plays transformed the political, social, and economic condition of his times into images and metaphors that were accessible to his audience.

His works were surrounded by a desperate immediacy. One of the problems with translating Annabhau's work, especially so long after they were written is that the translator faces the task of translating Annabhau's entire social situation across time. For his plays and *povadas* were written for a particular moment in time. They were made for an audience seized of the issues at hand. The audience's reactions to his works were also immediate. Inspired, angered, enlightened- but always immediately so. To read Annabhau's works with the luxury of time and the safe distance of history is in a sense to lose a large part of its relevance and meaning. Issues like the Unified Maharashtra movement, the conditions of

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<sup>6</sup> Phakira, Ashi hi Sataraci Tahra, Vajyantha, Tila lavthe Me Raktacha, Dongrchi Maina, Murli Mahlari, Warnicha Wagh.

<sup>7</sup> Baburao Gurav, *Annabhau in Memory*. (Mumbai: Lokvangmya Graha Publication, 1989.)

Dalit laborers under the feudal system have a contemporary taste. A reading of one of his plays or *povadas* feels like a social history of contemporary Maharashtra.

He doesn't use literature only as a positive force (creating the emancipatory discourse around the Dalit or the Working Class). He also uses it as a negative force, portraying the social realities, both of the oppressive systems of power and of the working classes' miserable conditions in a manner that decimates any hint of romance or possibility surrounding the survival of that order.

Annabhau demands an alternative social condition through his writing. His writing demands reformative change. His writing show the contemporary conditions of the workers and Dalits and seeks reform by creating an independent identity for the Dalit working class in India. His writings are anti-establishment. His writings signify the revolutionary ideologies of the anti-caste movement, which challenged and thought to transform the basic structure of Indian social system and trying to replace caste and the accompanying social operations of economic exploitation and political domination with an egalitarian society. Put simply his writing are revolutionary.

He represents the Dalit's hope for egalitarian idealism. He unleashed the power of the Dalit's utopia because he was moving towards a utopia himself. He continues to represent a forceful moral critique of a caste-ordered hierarchy and its excess and subvert unjustified inequality by launching alternative symbolization as a cultural construct. His writing is the symbolization not only of ideological contrast or control difference but also a move in creating new cultural capital for voiceless people and sharing asceticism through his literary activism. As an idealist his concerns were to formulate distinct cultural propositions for the Dalits. To this effect he provided his audience and readers the tools of cultural inspiration and social transformation.

As a proletariat thinker his observation is classical in that he thinks systematically and tries to recognize and build on the difference between the untouchable and the caste Hindu. His first step is to articulate those principles and strategies that can give him genuine cultural placements. The process of ideology formation starts when Annabhau's own cultural rethinking becomes linked coherently to his fraternity and so his thoughts are more empowered by a widely shared sense of moral injustice. His ideas of ideology begin to transform themselves into "weapon of protest". These days, his writings are generating social action and entering in the corridors of political power and strategies in Maharashtra. His popular ethnographical analysis makes social realities self-evident and turns protestor into social activist.

His surrounding was the barter system (Hindu reality) which was sometimes replaced by supreme human and cosmic virtue and harmony. He writes very seriously about devising or even legitimizing coercive sites of caste relationship particularly the concrete reality of disadvantages as experienced by those of low and unclean objective or caste.

His short stories give the taste of modern experience of untouchability. It was further shaped by the experience of those rural migrants that were in domestic labor or in scavenging. He writes of the arena in which the *Mang, Mahar, Bhangi*, (Dalits in Maharashtra) found new classes of patrons and employment among the trading people. In this way, he wrote about the caste system or *Varna* system to be cultural as well as economic.

As a Dalit writer, Annabhau Sathe was a leading personality in Maharashtra. In the 1960s his writing gave sophisticated creativity and great weal to the Dalit cultural and social movement particularly in Maharashtra. His writing gave new levels of self-pride, militancy and analytical clarity to the movement. Annabhau Sathe's literary activity gave Dalits a self-consciousness that proved to be a decisive factor in framing contemporary Dalit political, social and cultural movement in Maharashtra. His writings are useful and unique tools for understanding subaltern communities' artistic consciousness in Maharashtra. Due to these and other charismatic reasons he is the central figure of the Dalit literary movement in Maharashtra.

My dissertation will probably be the first work on Annabhau Sathe in English. Issues of subalternity, the persistent contradiction between the specific and the universal and the aliveness of the debates surrounding Dalit politics and theory make the introduction of Annabhau Sathe to the non-Marathi world an interesting and important move.

My work will also add to the body of knowledge in English of Indian writing. No biographical books have been written on him in English so it is my basic intension to write my research on Annabhau Sathe to provide a sophisticated understanding of his life and literary work both in their contemporary contexts and in today's context.

My work also has certain political and egalitarian motivations. Annabhau Sathe has been shortchanged: intellectually, socially, politically and materially. Annabhau's life and works have been an inspiration to me personally. By working on him I hope to bring in light his intense and prolific writing that has suffered anonymity and to enhance my understanding of his ideas. It is also the need of the hour to give subaltern and marginalized voices a space within the discourse of the university and academia. I hope my dissertation moves towards such legitimation.

The Marxist-Ambedkarite contradiction is one that runs through the Dalit movement and also colors its interaction with other egalitarian movements of the time. Annabhau's writings are rife with this contradiction. The poor in India are the lower castes. The class question according to Annabhau can only be resolved following a resolution of the caste question. Annabhau uses the tools provided to him by the class analysis to approach the caste question. I hope in my dissertation to work through this contradiction and arrive at some clarity of this complex through my work.

Annabhau has been represented as a literary figure. There can be no doubt about his credentials concerning this. However, I wish to make the assertion that his context and his social structuring did not allow for him to approach theory. I would also argue using Annabhau's experience that the fact that Annabhau falls short of resolving the above contradiction is in no mean part due to this. His extreme poverty, the lack of an intellectual community to whet his ideas and develop on them and the pressing demands of Dalit community for immediate emancipatory action all limited Annabhau Sathe's work. It is my contention that this is the case for most Dalit writers and intellectuals. I would like to show that a Dalit's structural location not only exploits him/her socially, culturally and politically, but also exploits him/her intellectually and academically.

The following chapters in this thesis shall engage with these issues in the following manner. In the second chapter, I shall attempt to classify Annabhau's writing into various genres and themes. I also try and create a chronology from the politics of publication that surrounded his work. The chapter will also discuss Annabhau's attempt at representing the Dalit experience, and the manner in which he deploys morality and infuses his writing with political vigor and social critique. The chapter tries to discern certain component parts and repeated ideas in his work and elaborate on them while considering all of Annabhau's writing as a composite body of work.

In the third chapter, I deal with a select few of his texts in greater detail and to focus on the literary aspects of these works. The lens I use will be the Dalit aesthetic. For one who had studied only until class four, if that, Annabhau goes on to produce a diverse and vast body of work. As the following readings of his texts will show, Annabhau's work was way to nuanced to fit a particular genre or an ideological position. His work is path breaking because it seeks to describe cultures, individuals, people, religion, hopes and desires that were till now collapsed into a single category 'untouchable'.

The attempt of the fourth and concluding chapter will be to open up the caste dynamics of his work. The deployment of caste into the otherwise "whole" and "stable"

category of class has met with much resistance from the literary and political world for a variety of reasons. But before I venture in to the existing conflicts in this domain, I would seek to sketch a brief history, both spatially and temporally, of the domain. The chapter shall then attempt to locate Annabhau's politics and examine how his work moves beyond the / limits of the Marxist paradigm and begins to map an indigenous Dalit consciousness.

## CHAPTER II

### A Critical Overview of Annabhau Sathe's writing

Annabhau Sathe's work needs to be viewed as a continuum for a variety of reasons. Firstly, Annabhau uses repetition to emphasize the universality of the Dalit experience. In work after work, the characters change, the situations change but the experience of misery and exploitation is constant. It is only through an overview of his literature that this emphasis is possible. The field of literature on Dalits is so sparse that viewing Annabhau's work in totality is essential to gauge its importance. By deploying this commonality of experience or Dalitness again and again Annabhau weaves sub-caste after sub-caste, community after community and region after region into his work. His work is not a benign canvas. It is a tool, much used by Annabhau in his lifetime and more so after his death.

Secondly, Annabhau's plays, novels, *povadas*<sup>8</sup>, short stories and *lavnis* form a single body of work. Characters from his novels appear in his short stories, characters from his short stories appear in his plays. Characters in one work refer to incidents in other works. The reader or viewer of his works is therefore assumed to be in the know of these characters. This is achieved either by the fact that they had seen or heard his previous work, or that the legends, popular figures, and incidents which Annabhau wrote about were widely known.

Thirdly, another important reason to view his work as a continuum is that almost all of Annabhau's writing is based on his own personal experience or stories told to him. His work is therefore, in a sense, an associational autobiography. Viewing them together not only tells us about the narrative rationale behind his writing, but also leaves us with a fantastic picture of the scope, depth, texture and complexity of Annabhau's life.

Fourthly, an overview of his work enables us to discern the development of Annabhau's distinct morality. It is a morality of existence, not one of testament. It is a dynamic morality. To read his sense of morality into one story is to miss its various dimensions. Each work of his contains many locations from which Annabhau explores and puts forth this tenuous but distinct morality.

In a similar manner, an overview of his work is required to understand the frame in which Annabhau negotiates with the aesthetic. Reading a single story would leave the reader with a sense of an aesthetic based in urban squalor, reading two would leave the reader with the feeling that Annabhau has rejected the aesthetic. As this chapter will show this is far from

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<sup>8</sup> Martial songs, a popular media widely used by many poets and philosophers in Maharashtra



the case. An understanding of Annabhau's politics also benefits from an overview of his work. Annabhau's work is an education of sorts in political theory: Moving spatially from the global to the national to the regional to the village and temporally from the feudal through the colonial and into the industrial political economy.

In this chapter I shall try and categorize Annabhau Sathe's work according to various literary genres. Following this I shall try and develop and distill certain themes that run through his work. I had, to start with, attempted to categorize his work chronologically, but given the nature and circumstance of his writing this proved a task beyond the scope of this research project. Annabhau's writing was sporadic and he never organised or dated his work. One of the reasons for this is that most of his work served propagandist aims and were contemporary and issue-based. Annabhau himself did not live in the circumstances that would enable him to organise and maintain his work. It is also possible that he saw his work as his productive contribution and once performed or sold or published into a pamphlet; he did not assert his claim over it as "his" intellectual property.

It is possible to relate the circumstances his writing to his works but this only gives us cut off dates and the works could have been written anytime after (the Bengal Famine for instance). His work was collected mainly after his death and compiled into volumes with no apparent mention of the year of writing. Using the dates of publication it is possible to attempt a certain (though possibly inaccurate) chronological classification of his work and I shall do so. With considerable license it is possible to classify the genres of his work chronologically as follows, *Povadas*, songs, plays, short stories, novels and a travelogue in 1968. I do not suggest that an exercise into chronologically categorizing his work is not possible, just that pursuit of such an endeavor would deviate considerably from the object and focus of this research.

In this chapter I shall classify and describe Annabhau Sathe's works into various sections such as *lok natyas*, *povadas*, short stories and novels. I shall also attempt brief descriptions of these works to enable a discussion on why I have chosen to classify Annabhau's works into specific themes and genres. Each of these sections shall distinguish the functions and currency these various media offered Annabhau and how he used them to his ends.

The focus of this Chapter is to attempt to trace the Dalit experience through Annabhau's work. I hope to be able to reflect on the manner in which Annabhau has brought the literary idiom to work on a subaltern category. I hope to investigate Annabhau's sense of the Dalit aesthetic, his use of description and empiricism, and the set forth the manner in

which his works are entwined. I would also like to use this chapter to seek an understanding of Annabhau's ethnographic conception of power, politics, culture and morality.

### *Povadas*

Annabhau's *povadas* or martial songs covered almost all matters that were of concern to him. It is thought that Annabhau wrote these *povadas* between 1942-1949. The *povadas* most strikingly deal with the strategies of survival of the working class: The conditions in which they interacted with life and the passion and drive with which they faced these conditions.

The *povadas* deal extensively with the productive facets of rural and urban life. Annabhau deploys irony and satire in no mean measure. His representation of life of the marginalized is by no means suggestive. It is brutally descriptive unearthing the near-fatal conditions in which the people closest to heart his lived. Annabhau's *povadas* test the limits and possibilities of existence of the working class. He distills micro-situations that are common occurrences and yet were till-then unspoken. In each of these situations he expands the lives and interactions of the actors and in each of them is evident the suggestion that socialism is the answer and the only possibility for egalitarianism.

The language he uses is of an extremely functional nature and the medium calls for an inventiveness of language which Annabhau commendably responds to. Annabhau's *povadas* also digress from his familiar particular contexts to expand onto a broad cultural canvas. He distances himself from the contemporary to give himself and his listener/reader the critical space need to contextualize the present. The *povadas* also serve as a space in which Annabhau is able to expand and suggest his conceptions of a social morality and justice. The other mediums do not allow him this distance and space as he remains committed in them to the immediate realities of the situation.

To begin an overview of his *povadas*, I shall start albeit arbitrarily with his broadest canvass and move on through the national, the regional, the local, the personal and finally arrive at the autobiographical. Of the many works Annabhau has dedicated to struggles and histories that have inspired people on a global scale *Stalingradcha Povada* (Stalingrad's *Povada*) written in 1942 stands out. Annabhau puts together a fascinating rendition of the events of the Second World War. Describing the rise of Nazi capitalist Germany, he tells of the invasion of Russia. The *povada* is of epic proportions but boils down to Annabhau distilling the spirit of resistance and the emotion that drove the Russian revolution. He sets up the war as an attack by the fascists on the workers and shows how the Red Army responded

to the brutal advance of the Nazis in Russia. The *povada* is a brief history of the Second World War but is used to extremely good effect by Annabhau to draw a parallel to the Dalits on a global canvas that was as yet untried. The scope and magnitude of the Russian resistance and the dire conditions of their battle was as perfect a metaphor the Dalit movement could have hoped for.

Although similar to the above *povada*, *Benaglchi Hak* is not only a warning, not only a social history. It is not only an attempt at creating a global workers' consciousness. Annabhau draws inspiration from non-Maharashtrian sources yet he is at the same time creating responsibilities, creating sites that must be preserved, which must be fought for. Many of his *povadas* can be seen as creating a pan-Indian consciousness. In 1944, Annabhau writes *Bengalchi Hak* (Bengal's Call) as an appeal to help the famine stricken in Bengal. Annabhau paints the most pathetic picture of famine, of want, of sorrow. Of the hoarding rich. Of those leaving hearth and home and selling what little they have to go in search of food. Dying by the roads of Calcutta. Some dying under trees, others begging for water, others for food. The land rich in tradition leaves nothing for the people. No choice but to sell their present for food. Annabhau's call is to preserve the present to also help remember the past.

Recording social histories and honing public moralities was not all that Annabhau used his *povadas* for. He was also actively creating histories which he used to legitimise and energise his present. *Maharashtracha Povada*, written in 1947, is a *povada* in eight parts, encompassing 800 years of Maharashtra's history. He begins with the geographical mapping of the state and by creating the physical setting of the history to come. The Sahayadri Mountains catches his eye first as he speaks of them almost as metaphors of the pinnacles of Maharashtrian achievement. The cities of Pune and Kholapur, the temples tucked away into scenic alcoves and the other markers of Maratha greatness.

It is from these hills that the rivers of time come crashing down. The Koyna, Krishna, Godavari meander through the plains, leaving life along its back and providing it with plenty. Linking cultures, giving birth to minds as inclusive and selfless as the rivers themselves. Tukaram, Gyaneshwar, the Warkari idiom, Jani, Eknath, Ramdas Maharaj.

These minds wrought a language that fused the till-then separate dialects of learning and interaction creating the basis of suggestions of commonality. The language itself left a lasting mark. Annabhau cannot but pause the course of history to appreciate the lyrical and soothing nature of the new tongue.

The new literature brings inspiration and change and sets men free; as the trees which form as integral a part of the history of the land as the forts and the hills. That had to be defended from the Mughals by Kholis, Bhils, Angres, and others forgotten by the histories of power. The Portuguese, the British, all leave their mark all as exclusive as the rest. Annabhau pauses to pay homage to the heroes of the 1857 rebellion and traces to them the inspiration for the struggles and changes that came between 1857 and 1947. Plotting Maharashtra on the nationalist map Annabhau invokes Mahatma Phule, Tilak, Phadke, Umaji Naik and others, Annabhau ends by having created a history sufficient to base a unified Maharashtra movement on. It is at this post independence struggle that he ends his *povada*.

A continuation of his desire for energising and inspiring the downtrodden to keep fighting even against seemingly insurmountable odds, can be seen in *Amarnerche Amar Hutatme* (Immortal martyr of Ammarner) written in 1949. Like *Stalingradcha Povada* and *Maharashtracha Povada*, *Amarnerche Amar Hutatme* is a eulogy, a social history and a searing political commentary. This *povada* is in memory of Sripathi Patil. Annabhau writes the state and the police into the *povada* as thugs. In Ammarner town (north Maharashtra), there was a huge strike, which remained peaceful on the promise a compromise. However, twenty futile days later the workers took out a protest march lead by Sripathi. The state then uses all its administrative weight to disperse the protest but to no avail. Then, on the orders of Moraji Desai, the Home Minister, Sripathi and eight others are shot by the police.

The *povada* is a both a eulogy and a condemnation. A praise and a lament. Annabhau sees the martyrs of Ammarner as inspiration for the struggles that face the Dalits while contesting a state controlled by thugs which they are alienated from. Inspiration was not all Annabhau hoped to provide through his work. His work was also largely to counter state propaganda. Many of his povadas were political commentaries. In *Mumbaicha Girni Kamgar* (Mumbai's factory workers) written in 1949 Annabhau traces the struggles and miseries of Bombay's factory workers across two regimes showing up the similarities of the apathy the workers faced. In 1948 the government ends negotiations of a six-month workers strike with bullets. The arrogant government continues to pile injustice and cruelty, but no one bowed their head. Many struggles mark their lives but one day all these come to a head. Work stopped one day. The city ground to a halt. Six months the workers starved surviving only on their belief. The loss of production too much to bear, the workers plight too insignificant to consider, the government attacks. One Martyr. Parshuram Jadhav. The strike ends. The workers plight worsens.

1950 another strike. The Congress government's face of Ram Rajya reveals the teeth of Ravan. More hunger, less tolerance. Two more martyrs Ganpath Pasare, Mahadev Khumbar. The workers hardened hand holds the world in plenty, but despondence and hunger are his lot. Arise and claim revolution, ends Annabhau on this note.

Unlike other Marxist writings, Annabhau is not engaged constantly with the political. However, it is never far from his expression. Time and again he used the personal to lay bare political and social structures. He does not see power as some amorphous entity that has to be combated in its vastness and intangibility. The marginalisation that power thrives on, Annabhau recognises as being located in everyday personal and social relations. *Mazi Maina Gavawar Rahili* (Of my lover left behind) is a *povada* that speaks of such marginalisation and pain. The *povada* is about the lover that a migrant worker had to leave behind. The idiom of description reflects the desires of that which brought him to Bombay. Of beauty, gold ornaments.

But the lover knows of the poverty that keeps him estranged. Knows that he has added his despondent story to the sad saga that is Bombay. The pain however is not new. He has carried it with him since before he left for Bombay's streets. But the pain in the poverty of Bombay is all that remains. Even in the memory of the only beauty he remembers. Such is the nature of Annabhau's aesthetic. Every picture of beauty he paints, all his art all his motion is a sepia of pain, dislocation, abuse and deprivation. Whether it is the natural beauty of Maharashtra ravaged by colonising armies, of Bengal's rich culture starved by poverty, or of a worker's desire intense full, but condemned to be thwarted even before it is felt, Annabhau's writing never allows pleasure to rest for long upon the esthetical without reminding the reader/listener of the desolateness of those he is writing about.

*Mumbaichi Lavani* (Ode to Bombay) written in 1949, is the perfect example of how Annabhau deploys the aesthetic. Though called a *lavani*, this *povada* reflects the misery and destituteness that is Bombay. Metaphor after metaphor lays bare the truth of the lives of the 30 lakh people that make the city breathe. But despondence and ugliness is the bottom line. Nothing is beautiful in so much misery. This is the city where the red flag in the hand of the worker is taking the first step to make a free generation. Change is all that holds promise. Change, or its promise is Annabhau's aesthetic.

It is here that we come up against the dialectic between Annabhau's need for change and his recognition of Indian social realities. The Marxist solutions, though intellectually and practically appealing, do not provide him with the synthesis that he desires. *Jagh Badal Galuna Ghauv* (Change the world with a hammer stroke) marks his recognition of a need for

a more specific philosophy, which he finds in Ambedkar. This *povada* reflects the inspiration Ambedkar's philosophy was in Annabhau's life. The *povada* is a dialogue between Ambedkar and Annabhau in which Ambedkar advises to him to break the shackles of slavery and brook no resistance. Unlike the other *povadas* this was written in the 1960s.

### Loknatya<sup>9</sup>

Written largely between 1945 and 1952, Annabhau's *loknatyas* were inevitably about exploitation and social relations that made up society. His audiences were an integral part of the idiom of his plays. His ten plays were performed hundreds of times to hundreds of thousands of viewers in the Ahemdabad, Ratnagiri and Kolapur belt in middle Maharashtra. His viewer base was vast, comprising educated middle class, Warli peasants, adivasis, peasants, factory workers, small landlords, historians, academics, doctors and civil servants.

The plays were of immediate and in dialogue nature and the language is full of current metaphors at once accessible to his audiences. The language was that of the peasants and, in a society that had just begun moving away from agriculture, the idiom was still familiar and appealing.

The similarities between the language of Mahatma Phule and Annabhau become most evident in Annabhau's *loknatyas*. The functions the *loknatyas* of both men performed were almost similar. Annabhau used the plays to address contemporary political issues. The plays were informative, critical and analytical of the existing political situation and were in a sense the locations for the creation of a responsive society. Annabhau used the plays to highlight injustice, ridicule oppressive exploitation and social relations of the powerful castes and to offer solutions and inspiration. Annabhau also used the plays as a platform for promoting the Unified Maharashtra movement. The appeal of his plays over vast stretches of the state and Annabhau's ability to find the real underlying similarities between the people, that of exploitation, and the desire for a new politics, went a long way on promoting the Unified Maharashtra movement.

The plays also reflect Annabhau's communist leanings. Worker-capitalist interactions and the relations between the workers and the state are also a popular theme. However, his Ambedkarite understanding do not allow his communist leanings to cloud his acute perception of the caste relations prevalent in the state and his plays bring out these relations and the contradictions between them time and again.

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<sup>9</sup> Street Play.

The *loknatyas* also possess a interesting development of the traditional Songade (the fool) into Annabhau's trademark Dhonde who appears time and again with scalding social commentary, that is narratively possible only because of his totally marginalized space in society. Dhonde became a symbol of the resistance against the capitalist attack on the workers and was remembered for long after the plays were performed.

Most street plays of the time were of the Radha-Krishna, Ashuk-Mashuk love saga variety and Annabhau was one of the pioneers of popularizing the political street play across middle Maharashtra. The *Lal Bhauta Pathak*, of which Amar Sheikh, Gavankar, Ganpath Sathpothe, Manu Karkanis, Ghodi Tharsandekar and Annabhau were part, helped develop and perform most of Annabhau's street plays.

Being a member of the Communist party Annabhau's plays were usually directed against the Congress party. Many of his plays focus on the fact that the Congress party simply continued to maintain the feudal order left behind by the British. *Sethjiche election* (The Seth's election) written in 1947. The play is written in the euphoria that surrounds newly independent India. The Congress dominates the political scene. The play is written through the eyes of communist party worker who observes the nexus between the British, the industrialists and the Congress and their politics. The changing commitments of the Congress party and its abandoning of those people who made up its foundations is brought to light in Annabhau's play.

Satthu, a revolutionary peasant who had risked what little he had to engage in the freedom struggle, feels the need to contest for a Congress ticket to the Legislature. His credentials are impeccable. In the 1942 Sathyagraha, he was actively involved in sabotaging the British state disrupting communications and organizing blockades. He had left his government job and organised burnings of foreign goods at risk to life and limb. Pre-1948, there could be no greater recommendation, no greater list of deeds. His life was the stuff legends are made of.

Magarchand, a Gujarathi businessman who exploited the shortages of colonial India and grew fat on the black market, also desires a ticket to the Legislature. Magarchand, who used to hob-nob with the governor, was the antithesis of all those eulogized by the freedom movement.

When they arrive at the Congress office to seek a ticket, Satthu is in for a shock. Sakharam Bapu, the party worker in charge of giving out tickets reveals the face of the new Congress. Through sharp dialogues Satthu realises that things have changed. The very talents and courage that made Satthu a hero are now being used to deny him a ticket. The discourse

is shifting. And Annabhau uses his skill to bring to light the farcical nature of the justifications being used.

Dialogue upon dialogue reveal that the Congress is only seeking lame excuses to prevent Satthu from getting the ticket. Magarchad, himself uses poorly disguised coercion threatening to join the Hindu Mahasabha if he is not given a ticket. The play goes on to reveal the changing nature of the Congress' social commitment. The revolution that Satthu had dreamt of (*shethkari, kamgar rajya anayech ahe*) was being supplanted by the social engineering that would most benefit the likes of Magarchad.

The play is about the "injection" (a pun on election that plays itself out better in spoken Marathi) that Magarchad administers to the Congress and the workers alike to numb them to the "new realities". He controls the money the Congress needs to survive and therefore the path the Congress will take. The play is in a sense a prophecy of times to come. Time and again Satthu reminds the audience of the need for a peasants voice in the legislature and time and again both Babu and Magarchad contradict him saying the new nation needs statesmen not peasants (implying thereby the new nation will not have "ears" for the peasants.) The play was written at a time when the Congress was opening its doors to all possible sources of funds and rewarding them with political tickets. The play is, in a sense, about how the survival of the Congress was given priority over the survival of the Indian revolution.

Annabhau's plays deal with the immediate, bringing social political dialogue into the idiom of the masses. These like law, justice, equality, indeed most of the assumptions of the liberal state are problematised. *Bekaideshir* (Illegal) opens with Rahgunathmal discussing a strike notice that with a worker in his factory, Dhonde. As it happens the notice is issued by Satthu. Satthu, who bears a striking resemblance to the hero of *Sethji chi election*, is a freedom fighter who participated in the 1942 Sathyagraha and then left the Congress disgruntled. He is now a left-wing trade unionist.

The dialogue between Rahgunathmal and Dhonde is in the form of sharp banter and brings to light almost all facets of the current political scene. Through the scene Raghunathmal's (representative here of the new national bourgeois) impressions of the character of a Congressman come out in dry humour.

His sympathy is for Satthu who left the (lucrative) Congress and joined the Left. No good Congressman should be organising strikes. They should be wearing *Khadi*, spinning cotton and talking *ahimsa*. And Dhonde adds, they should be breaking up unions and creating conflicting interests among workers (taking a dig at the Congress trend of creating new



worker cells). The strike continues and begins to spread. Enter Magarchand. Now a minister, the next few scenes reveal his close links to the industrialists in an embarrassingly clear manner.

The scene shifts to a confrontation between Sattu and Magarchad. Words like propriety, law and order and the disjuncture of these concepts with the living and working conditions of the workers riddle the conversation. Annabhau makes the parallel between the British administrator and the Congressman Magarchad very clear. Magarchad is already describing the acts that were considered liberating during British rule as law and order problems. When confronted with the fact that the workers are at the receiving end this law, Magarchand responds saying that the survival of the nation (as separate from the workers) is at stake and violence is needed to maintain the Pax Indica. The play however ends with the strike having reached gigantic proportions, managing even to bring Magarchand's car to a standstill. Much against his and Raghunathmal's wishes Magarchand is forced to accede to the workers demands.

Annabhau's plays had a tremendous ability to leave the audience enthused with hope and confidence. Many of Annabhau's plays are like *Sethjiche election*, ending in the victory of the workers. Annabhau's plays however, are not always about triumph. They are also intrinsically about struggle and survival. And of the sense of community that comes from struggling and surviving together. Much of Annabhau's aesthetic is created by the way in which he reaffirms particular senses of community that are not otherwise given theatrical or literary space. Of these, *Mazi Mumbai Arthath Kunachi* (My Bombay, who else's?) the story of the many surfaces of the faceless Bombay that lives on the edge, is the perfect example.

The backdrop of this play is the drought that hit Maharashtra in the early years of independence. Massive migration, urban unemployment and the Unified Maharashtra movement made up the political discourse of the time. The scene is set in a migrant workers slum. Bharku and Ganu sit discussing the tribulations of an out-of-work migrant called Vishnu. Tracing his life they delve into the unemployment that racks Bombay and discuss the then-evident cause: Immigrant traders from other states, better equipped with necessary skills and capital.

The conversation moves from Bombay to incorporate the problems facing the whole of Maharashtra. A Chaucerian depiction of the times follows. Bharku and Ganu bring under scrutiny the temples of modern India and their attendant problems. More specifically, displacement. There is present a social exploration into the dynamics of displacement: who is displaced, what does displacement and relocation mean to those displaced.

Annabhau brings out in particular the plight of the Dalit. Though not mentioned specifically by caste, a reading into surnames and living conditions reveals Annabhau's attempt to highlight the linkage of the Dalit's social and survival skills to his/her particular environment. On being displaced, the Dalit is not only physically displaced but also experientially displaced. It is this experiential displacement that Annabhau brings out in the dialogue and links to the alienation that is forced onto urban workers.

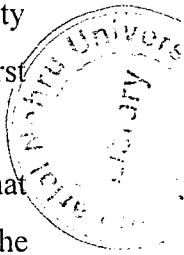
New characters enter to highlight the cultural capital of the migrant traders (*Munim*) and the displaced plight of the workers. The play ends with Vishnu emphasizing the need to fight for a unified Maharashtra, and not give into the politics of hunger that the traders are using to their benefit.

The community that Annabhau's plays create is also constantly placed in locations of mainstream ideologies and moralities. In a couple of his plays Annabhau shows how existing political moralities are not what his communities require. *Mukh Mirounuk* (Silent protest) puts Gandhian socialism and non-violence under the scanner. In *Mukh Mirounuk*, Vishnu and his wife, Putula, introduce life in a migrant workers slum. Having to live in a cloth shanty that is not even their own, the uncertainty of their life comes out in brutal clarity in the first scene.

Sure enough in the next scene Rehm and Dhondi are discussing the eviction of that very slum, which they too call home. Around them people plan different futures, on the street, returning home, standing and fighting, lamenting. However the deadpan discourse of Rehm and Dhondi, stands in ironical contrast to their plight. They talk of strikes all over the country, of Nehru's latest speech claiming the resistance to Hindi promotion is a communist ploy and of the rise of the capitalist class.

The residents decide to agitate to protect their home. Enter Upse. A socialist with Gandhian leanings. Advising against the creation of a mob, he suggests the residents go on a silent march. He invokes the fragile nature of the independent India's political and social fabric in his arguments. The residents agree.

On the March, Upse is confronted with a police inspector, invested with the arrogance of state power. The dialogue that ensues is a graphic description of the contradictions between the idealism that narrated the freedom movement and the reality of the new national state in India. The conversation ends with the inspector hitting Upse. Vishnu and Putula confront the inspector and ignoring his threats the residents continue on their way lead by couple. The protest goes from silent to vocal.



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The character of Upse is portrayed without malice, but is recognised in his own language his morality is not ridiculed in the script; it is simply brought into contrast. Annabhau time and again uses internal contradictions to deconstruct ideas and structures he sees as problematic instead of condemning them with rhetoric.

This is a strategy or style that is repeated in Annabhau time and again. He uses incidences that one would take for granted in everyday life and by juxtaposing them together he allows his plays to problematize each instance or social morality. This is particularly evident in *Lok Mantryacha Douwra* (The Minister's Tour), Annabhau sets the scene with two distinct interactions between the Minister's secretary Ghotale and Khataria, a representative of local factory owners and with Vishnu, a trade Union leader.

The former interaction has Ghotale behaving in a slavish manner before Khataria who comes to meet the Minister who is on tour. With Vishnu he is brash and rude, denying him his right to meet the minister and using classist language to dismiss him. Magarchand returns after being on tour for eight days and Ghotale briefs him about the goings on in his absence. The manner in which Ghotale prioritizes news and proffers opinions, reflects the manner in which the bureaucracy has converted the process of government into a redressal of vested interests.

The scene shifts to Magarchand and Khataria addressing a meeting at the slum where Vishnu and most of his union live. The speech is particularly worth noting. Absolving himself of any responsibility for the workers conditions he seeks refuge in the fact that he has been in power only for short time. Pushing the new government policy he says the answer to all the nation's problems is in planting more trees. No matter what the problem trees are the answer. And more importantly the only answer he is willing to provide.

He also recommends that the workers eat less, work more and increase production, as it was the need of the hour. He suggests that workers eat more gruel and that is what is best for them. Vishnu interjects saying that perhaps fodder should also be consumed because it helps cows give more milk. The confrontation continues with Vishnu raising specific workers concerns and the minister answering with generalised statements like plant more trees.

The confrontation ends with the police cornering Vishnu and his comrade and implying that he is wanted for disturbing the peace (Annabhau uses this "crime" to great effect in his plays) elsewhere. The minister also condemns them. But not before Vishnu has the last word saying that they are off to the lock up and the minister can cultivate crops in his hat and plant a tree (a jibe at Nehru and his rose) in his pocket as there will be no one to do it for him.

Rye humour is liberally sprinkled in Annabhau's plays. Time and again the reader cannot help but laugh out loud while reading his plays and no doubt he used this humour to good effect to hammer home his message.

### **Katha**<sup>10</sup>

Annabhau's short stories, like his novels were not published till after his death. Given the exclusive nature of the medium (accessible only to those who could read) they did not find the appeal and popularity that his *loknatyas* and *povadas* did. However, even before his death his characters were legends. How this happened is still a mystery. But the importance and pioneering nature of his work is in no way reduced by this.

The short stories deal with particular human circumstances. These too are about modes of survival. The stories cover a wide range of characters, social conditions and eras. Urban and rural, pre-independence and post independence. Workers, the poor, Dalits and women make up the central characters. The tensions that wrought survival are strung tight through his stories. The alienation of the characters and the conditions of this alienation are dealt with in depth but with careful brevity.

The stories require the reader to enter the paradigm of the poor. The conditions and relations that Annabhau describes could well be out of fantasy but they are not. The stories are not so much about plots as about Annabhau using the situations to project and make available for solidarity and understanding the mind and life space that the characters occupy. The sense of the situation that the reader is left with is a bodily experience far more powerful and lasting than the characters or their particular lives.

If the reader is unable to occupy this space, he is left with empty words. Most of Annabhau's readers, however, were only a generation away from that space. A major theme in Annabhau's works, especially in his short stories, is the problematizing of stereotypes related to Dalits. Till then the Dalit has been portrayed as a gangster, a cheat, a thief or an amoral sexual predator. Annabhau's short stories try to remove the moral baggage that these categories carry and investigate and expose the manner in which Dalits are written into the public imagination. Both *Nilu Mang* and *Bhomkiya* are two examples of short stories written about characters that have been condemned by circumstance.

*Nilu Mang* stands tied to the open end of a cannon. The short story *Nilu Mang* opens in this dramatic fashion, and proceeds in flashback, a technique Annabhau uses time and

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<sup>10</sup> Short stories.

again his stories. Nilu Mang lived in Sazurgaon. He belonged to a caste that was notorious as criminals. Nilu Mang however, had made a name for himself with his honesty and hard work.

Sazurgaon was also home to Cheema Patil and Bheema Patil. The two had a family feud that had gone on for generations and spared no chance to make each other's life miserable. As it happened, Nilu Mang was to work on Bheema Patil's land protecting his crop. Cheema tries to instigate Nilu Mang to steal Bheema's crop. Nilu refuses and invites Cheema's anger. Cheema loses no time in accusing Nilu Mang of having killed his cattle. An accusation from a powerful upper-caste man against a Mang was as good as a conviction. Nilu Mang was sent to prison for three months.

He survived prison but his reputation did not. Unable to rid himself of the stigma of his crime Nilu was pushed further and further to the fringes of society. Following an accidental murder, he finds newfound self-respect in working outside the law. Here begins the circumstantial return of Nilu to his given caste identity. He moves from petty crime to robbing the state treasury. When he is finally arrested and condemned to death by cannon shot, he seeks no sympathy saying that he has come from begging for tobacco at a distance to meriting a death as expensive as cannon shot.

When asked by the British officer if he has any last words, Nilu Mang standing tied to the open end of a cannon recounts his story. Seeing the hand of chance and the twists of circumstances in Nilu Mang's story the officer sets him free. Nilu return's home swearing never to stray from the law again. The story is a reflection of the compulsions that dog every Dalit's social choice. The weight of his caste is so great that the battle to stay afloat marks most of his life.

*Bhomkiya* is the story of a man who Annabhau met in prison. Bhomkiya was a misfit. He was huge. He was ugly. His clothes did not fit him. He did don't fit his bed. He was butt of everyone's jokes and ridicule in prison. Annabhau's curiosity in him led him to ask about his name, as Annabhau could not place the roots of such a name. Never had he heard it before and neither had anyone he knew heard such a name. It prompted Annabhau to ask Bhomkiya his story and this is how it went...

Bhomkiya's story was a simple one. He was a beggar, eking out a living on the streets of Amravathi with his wife and children. However his appearance proved a handicap. One day, he received a large amount of alms from a house. The next day he returned and was rewarded similarly. On the fourth day, when he went to seek alms, he found the house had been robbed. The Seth of the house sees Bhomkiya and immediately accuses him of having

robbed the house on the basis that he was here seeking alms four days in a row. Bhomkiya is thrown into prison where Annabhau meets him.

Annabhau ends his narration with a tirade against the capitalist system and the manner in which the justice process works to serve the rich. He ends very powerfully by saying that the only meaning he found for the name Bhomkiya was this. It is the name of the stone hurled onto the consciousness of cultured India by the truth of Indian slavery.

Annabhau stories do not only deal with the external constraints on the Dalits life. Time and again, both in his plays and his short stories he brings up the issue of superstition, again not ridiculing, but dealing with it in its own language, making his point only by contrasting it with other ways of seeing. Even this move can be seen as his attempt to delimit the constraints under which the Dalit must labour be they social, psychological or physical.

*Mariaaicha Gada*<sup>11</sup> is about the goddess of the destitute in rural Maharashtra. The story is set in a time where a disease has claimed considerable lives in a village. True to tradition the villages seek to appease Mariaai. Tradition requires that the villages take their livestock to the *devi*, who is usually on the outskirts of the village land and then hit them and send them packing in the presence of the *devi* and with them the spirits plaguing the village would leave.

However a young man called Nana, suggests that the diseases are spreading because of the filth that had accumulated in the village and a visit by the doctor would cure the ailing. The elders pay no heed and continue with their plan. The procession of livestock goes on its way. However, Nana intervenes again and points out that the direction they are heading in ends in another village and to send the livestock and the spirits in that direction would bring harm to that village. As quite a few villages had relatives in the said village, the procession changes direction. However thanks to Nana, the procession always faced a village with relatives. With nowhere to go the villagers finally give into Nana's suggestions and manage to rid the village of its pestilence. The story pokes constant fun at the ridiculousness of the superstitions prevalent. It highlights the conflict between the old and the young and the roles each play in liberating the mind.

But Annabhau does not leave the burden of superstition and pre-modern thinking only on the Dalits. His stories are also sharp critiques of upper-caste "epics" which he re-writes in modern day satire. In *Ram-Ravan yudh* Annabhau revisits the Ramayana in a lighter vein.

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<sup>11</sup> This would translate into the wheel of the Goddess Mariaa. The Goddess, patron and protector of the Dalits was usually enshrined in the west of the village. The Wheel was paraded regularly in times of celebration and calamity.

The Satav-Murari family feud was famous. Not just in Kundalwadi but in the whole Warna valley. So famous in fact that the *jathra* (fair) that Kundalwadi organised could not be held for fear of disruption by either one of the families.

The daily lives of all the villagers had been badly affected by the feud. Tired with the state of affairs, the villagers approach the two families asking for a ceasefire to enable them to hold the *jathra*. After much resistance the two families agree and even decide to contribute to the success of the *jathra*.

It was decided that they organise the Ramleela. The day arrived and the stage was set. But the audience was treated to a *ramleela* of a different kind. The families began to match each other act for act. What began as the *ramleela* transformed itself into something altogether else. The son of the Satav family makes off with the daughter of the Murari family and the Murari family sends someone to get her back. The Hanuman of the Murari family is by no means a match for the *rakshasas* who show no inclination of taking a beating as the script instructs. In no time at all the Hanuman has abandoned all ideas of reclaiming Sita and flees to save life and limb. The play ends in chaos. With the scions of both families egging there kin on as the whole fair becomes a battleground.

The story is a satire on the epic. It reads questions of property and of subordination into the epic and uses the structure of the epic to expose the anarchy of greed of modern India's elite. Greed, lust, desire and exploitation find mention and focus in Annabhau's works time and again. His stories also deal extensively with the manner in which the woman's body is viewed as property to be bought and coveted. *Bilwari* is one such tale. Bilwari was a dancer, a Kolati by caste. Difficult though it was all she did was dance. Many a time she resisted invitations, threats and bribes to continue her performance in private.

The season was of festivities and Bilwari and other performers had arrived in Yellapur as they did every year. She catches the fancy of the Inamdar of the village, a notorious womanizer. After watching her perform several times in public, he approaches her with his faithful servant Amin. Amin has thus far lived to serve his master, doing his bidding and substituting his will for his master's command. The Inamdar asks Bilwari to dance at his wadi.

Suspicious of his intentions she agrees all the same. The dance is uneventful. Again and again the Inamdar sends Amin to ask Bilwari to dance for him. Amin slowly begins to fall in love with Bilwari and the beginnings of the awakening of his individual spirit are seen. The day comes when the invitation to dance for the Inamdar holds more foreboding than promise. Bilwari goes, unable to say no. Half way through her performance, the Inamdar

grabs her. Amin hears the ensuing ruckus, and rushes to intervene preventing the Inamdar from molesting Bilwari. The Inamdar orders his men to kill Amin. A quiet subservient Amin is transformed by love and passion into uncontrollable violence and he leaves the wadi, and the Inamdar and his men dead.

The story is of the birth of the self. The individual and his desires, his wants and his taking his destiny into his own hands. Not one to leave any issue unproblematised, Annabhau looks at the dark side of individualism, the side brought out by the competitive market. In *Mukul Mulani*, Annabhau delves into how within the working class, where the means of survival are so few, where money is limited where jobs are not growing, the growth of the individual usually takes place at another's expense.

A Bombay slum. Diverse. Muslims, Dalits, tribals, Christians united in their poverty. Characters from various families teem in and out of the slum. Meeting in community spaces but still within there desperate poverty managing to keep and maintain a threadbare sense of identity. The various strata within the poor. The humor of the newly converted zealous of their new found culture. The patience of those who kept their identities, resisting the temptations to change.

Within this vibrant and desolate space lives Mukul Mulani and his two sons with their families, ten in all. The wheels of commerce grind Mukul's two son's jobs out of existence. Amir and Muhammad unable to find work anywhere begin to leave fending for the family to their father. Mukul is unable to feed ten mouths with his meager earnings selling mutton.

After much conflict the sons decide to sell mutton at the same market that Mukul does. They begin to bring home less and less each day and Mukul's earning also drop. One day an old lady who has been buying mutton from Mukul for ages arrives to shop for mutton. Mukul's sons try to woo her to their stall. But Mukul claims her allegiance. A fight ensues and they begin to pull the woman in different directions. In the fracas, Amir hits his father.

The story ends here, tearing up the introductions of coexistence that Annabhau built up in the beginning. Poverty, as the poem that ends the story goes, has no morality. No relations, no rules. Only despondence and whatever enables survival. Again Annabhau's aesthetic comes into sharp relief, where he paints a celebratory picture of life only to brutally splash it with the blood of fructified. And yet, Annabhau does not leave all morals lost. He does not leave the soul befret of right and wrong. As in *Mukul Mulani*, many other stories of Annabhau's distill Annabhau's aesthetic of poverty and suffering and survival. *Barbadhya Kanjari* is a story of how even the most extreme poverty, ostracization and physical harm cannot dampen the will of a man who knows he does right.



In *Barbadhya Kanjari*, we get a sketch of the life of a character from a nomadic, uneducated, poverty-stricken community namely the *Kanjari*, a community that lives in hutments in slum areas in Bombay. Annabhau shows how modernity and the speed with which it engulfs and traverses the world can skip a slum less than half a mile away as though a blockade ostracized it from the world.

The story is of Barbadhya Kanjari. The slum was filled with people who eke out a living seeking alms as they were denied the opportunity to produce. Desolation, poverty, lack of spirit and hunger mark the slum. It brings with it the worst condition and inhuman practices that prevail in the community from which Barbadhya hails. Barbadhya, as per the prevalent practice in his community, sells his beautiful daughter, Nilli for Rs 200 to one Dallaram to whose son, namely Saidya, Nilli will be married.

By tradition, Nilli is bound to stay with her in-laws house till her death even if her husband dies. But when Saidya dies, Nilli runs away with one Haidarya, a youth who lived in a hut right in front of hers. When Dallaram comes to know about this development, he holds Nilli's father responsible for her running away and asks him to return the money. But Barbadhya refuses to agree to this demand. Consequently, a fight ensues. The court of the caste is summoned which declares Barbadhya guilty and asks him to pay back the Rs 200 to Dallaram. And when he refuses to pay they ostracize him from the community and cut off his ear. But the fighter Barbadhya does not bother about the troubles that lie like storms in wait for him owing to his ostracization.

But Annabhau is not a romantic. Neither is he trying to enthrall his readers with a spirit that is based on propaganda. Time and again his stories have no heroes. Only pain. Only the loss that accompanies the lives of most of the marginalised.

*Samashantil Sona* (Gold in the Graveyard) is one such story. This story shows the worst plight of the poor, the uneducated and unemployed millions of our country. It further shows that poverty and unemployment can force a man to live even by digging out buried corpses, by shifting through the ashes and searching the mortal remains of the cremated/buried bodies in an attempt to find trinkets of gold that are buried with dead bodies mainly of Hindus. By selling out these trinkets on the dead bodies, the central character of the story, namely Bhima, earns his and his family livelihood since the quarry in which he was employed was suddenly closed down.

Although his wife is uncomfortable with his new profession, Bhima sees that he is able to make more in a few hours now than he could ever hope for toiling all day in the mine. There can be no morality for the hungry. The work begins to take a toll on his mind. Sifting

through the ashes the line between the living and the dead begin to get blurred. He begins to see the rich by the gold in their ashes and the poor by the poverty of their ashes. He begins to resent those who die without leaving something behind and comes to think as the rich as being the only ones with the right to die and the poor as not even deserving death and their dying serves no purpose.

One night, while approaching a buried corpse, he is attacked by a dozen wolves. A fight ensues between him and the wolves for the possession of the buried body. The wolves tear out lumps of his flesh. Bhima fights with the wolves. Shooing them away, he approaches the corpse. In doing so his hand gets caught in the tightly-locked jaw of the corpse. The wolves attack again. With one hand incapacitated he fights the wolves but they tear his flesh from his body in the total dark of the night. The scene is likely to shake the readers to their roots and send shivers down their spine. Bhima's misery does not stop here. In a bid to free the fingers that were caught in the corpse's mouth, he looses his fingers which incapacities him for any effective manual work. Ironically, he learns that the closed down quarry is reopening the next day. Annabhau seems to be asking if any fiction can be stranger than this reality?

The story brings to light various facets of Annabhau's morality, most clearly its materialist base. However he does not surrender his morality to the dictates of material reality. If in *Babariya Kanjari*, Annabhau celebrates the individuals battle against the confines of a restrictive community, many other stories are about the community itself galvanizing itself to battle the confines of a restrictive society. He is constantly suggesting other modes of being, different politics and morality, as his seen in his espousal of alternative community living in *Sapla*.

His story *Sapla* (Trap) contains descriptions of the plight of Dalits fifty years ago which would to our eyes today seem unrealistic. It shows what kind of commotion was created in rural Maharashtra when, due to the appeal made and the consciousness created among the Dalits by Dr Babashaheb Ambedkar, the erstwhile Dalit refused to dispose of dead cattle and also gave up eating carrion. It is story about untouchability and the revolution of the untouchables in a village named Parahaon, and about the attempts of the high-caste village to entrap and obstruct the untouchable emancipation and about how the untouchables turn the tables on the village.

Parahaon ostracizes the Mahars of the village when they refuse to eat the meat of dead cattle and perform "unclean" acts. They are denied food, water and employment and the

villagers threaten to burn their *wadi*<sup>12</sup>. The Mahars are undeterred by these threats and call the villagers bluff saying they were planning to burn their *wadi* themselves. The Mahars leave the village and gather together. Haribha Mahar learns of the sale of land adjoining the village at the taluka office. He persuades the Mahars to sell their cattle and whatever little they have of value. Armed with all the community has Haribha leaves for the auction.

The Patels, Marathas and other powerful castes that are present are shocked at Haribha's entry. The auction however, continues. A Patil whose influence spreads over ten villages makes a bid. An even more powerful Maratha makes a higher bid. Haribha outbids them all and returns with the land in the Mahars' name. The community sets up habitation.

The villagers however have not given up trying to punish the Mahars' defiance. Every time a Mahar's animal strays onto their land they confiscate it. One day the buffalo of the village Patil strays onto Mahar land and Haribha confiscates it. The villagers realize that there is no way but to make amends. Although Annabhau evokes the community as a whole while appealing for action against those who oppress them, he is aware of the internal contractions of the community.

*Upkarachi Fed* (Paying back favors) shows how even among the depressed classes the notion of superiority and inferiority were prevalent. This story also like *Sapla* shows the influence of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's movement against the oppression of the depressed classes and Dr. Ambedkar's attempt at boosting the confidence of these classes. The story begins with a detailed portrayal of the behaviour and qualities of different castes the way they perform their daily functions ~~they~~ manner in which they interact with each other and the way they interact with the world at large and with their work.

A Mang and a Mahar have come to a Chamar's house to get their shoes fixed. The Chamar being higher up within the sub-caste hierarchy never mends shoes of those lower than him, the Mang's or the Mahar's. It was custom for him to throw out his awl and anvil and for the lower castes to mend their own shoes.

It was also custom to offer those that came to avail his service tea. When the tea arrived, in cups set aside for those lower than the Chamar, the Mang takes the offered tea and drinks it. The Mahar however is slowly being inspired by Ambedkar's ideas of emancipation and social justice. He refuses to drink the tea from a Chamar's house, saying the Chamar was as unclean as he was. This infuriates the Chamar.

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<sup>12</sup> Ghetto

Sometime later an animal dies at the Chamar's house. It is the Mahar's traditional job to dispose of dead animals outside the village. The Mahar refuses to do so asking the Chamar to do his own dirty work as the Chamar would not do work for the Mahar. The Chamar cannot imagine disposing a carcass. A mob gathers and the Mahar stands up to them. Then a village Patil arrives and, to the Chamar's surprise, holds that the Mahar's action is socially justified.

Annabhau is constantly grappling with the idea of social change. His plays and stories are aimed at creating new politics, new social relations, and new identities. But fundamentally, Annabhau writes about people. Sometimes the people he writes about live lives that thwart Annabhau's attempts at creating a social awareness. Sometimes he is not able to incorporate or understand his world. But this does not lead him to dismiss these parts of world.

*Walan* is one of the stories, which deals with various facets of Ambedkar's movement for the eradication of social injustice against Dalits. Dr Ambedkar's movement was against the deep-seated evils, practices, acts, habits and prejudices in the minds and behavior of non-Dalits as well as among the Dalits. His movement was an attempt to make all those concerned to part with all that was evil, unpleasant, unhygienic, inhuman and a basis for apartheid in India. Dr. Ambedkar had appealed to all Dalits to give up unhygienic and unpleasant habits like eating carrion, which was one of the deep-seated habits, due to economic social compulsions. But many of the Dalits found it somewhat difficult to part with the habit. In fact their behavior was not exceptional it was in line with a proverb that says old habits die hard.

*Walan* shows how all the Mahars (new Buddhists) of a village decide to give up eating carrion in response to Dr Ambedkar appeal and how a seventy-year-old lady namely Chima from the erstwhile Mahar community finds it difficult to quite the deeply-engrained habit of eating the flesh of dead buffalo.

## **Novels**

Annabhau was thought to be writing novels in the last decade of his life (the 1960s). They were however published in huge volumes only after his death, the last one being published in 1995. Annabhau was writing when the novel was an elite domain. The idiom, the gaze of the novelist, the manner in which he dealt with his characters were far from sufficient for Annabhau's purposes. The people he was writing for needed to create a cultural

imagination and Annabhau recognized and gave them their heroes, and their space in the literary imagination, so crucial for the creation of new communities.

Annabhau's novels offer detailed descriptions of the natural surrounding of rural life in middle Maharashtra. His images of the geography and of rural scenery and life, of beauty and resilience, are used as part of the characters that inhabit his novels. The land as making the people. *Tamasha*, *Waghya Murodia*, barter system, the police station, jails, urban slums, form the locations and sometimes become the characters in his novels. The works are peopled with dacoits, rebels, urban criminals. Never before have such protagonists found non-marginalised spaces in novels.

The novels abound with the pathos and absurdity of the conditions in which the urban and rural poor live in. The stories are about people's leaders; both male and female. In no other medium does Annabhau find himself able to present these heroes and heroines and flesh them out in the manner he desires.

His novels can be seen to be dealing with specific themes such as Marxism, rural life, feminism and revolution. Before Annabhau, disparate novels were written about these themes, but none in the manner and detail and with the perspective Annabhau manages.

*Chitra*, *Vaijayanta*, *Chandan* and *Fulpakhru* are the novels that I have chosen through which to investigate Annabhau's writing on the feminine, on feminism, on patriarchy and the commodification of the woman's body and its subsequent alienation. These novels explore sexual mores in a manner unknown to the novelists of the time. The manner in which Annabhau writes constantly problematised the gaze with which Dalit women were perceived as available sites of male desire.

*Chitra* is titled after the central character Chitra. This novel shows the demerits of industrialization that took place in cities like Bombay around in the 1940s and 1950s and its effects on the sexual morality of people. The "plot" of the novel is set in the abject poverty that stretches from the slums to the gaudy brothels in Bombay. The story of poverty is not restricted to the boundaries of Bombay. The shadow of poverty stretches into the villages of Maharashtra. Annabhau squeezes the literary metaphor to depict the circumstances that bind the rural poor.

His description of Chitra's family and the manner in which they exploit the subterranean sexual mores of rural Maharashtra to eke out a living tell of alienation not only from one's work but from one's self. For when the site of work is one's body then the alienation is from the self. The novel patiently holds the poverty that exists not being brief, not collapsing metaphors. Annabhau's acuteness of social understanding helps him pick out

the most entrapping situations. In every town in Maharashtra such a family as Chitra exists, and Annabhau's narration makes the poverty of *Pather Panchali* seem like a romantic depiction of rural India. *Chitra* depicts the flesh trade that boomed along with the increase in industrialization and how thousands of women were made the victims of flesh-traffickers. Due to the attraction of money, even some of the closest kith and kin forced female relatives into the flesh trade.

Chitra's story stands testimony to this theme. Her maternal uncle first forces her elder sister, Sona, into prostitution in Bombay and then he tries to do the same with Chitra. But she puts up a stiff struggle and saves herself from selling her flesh, marries Jays, a communist activist and a worker in a factory in Bombay and moves away from the incapacitating strictures of her circumstance.

Many of Annabhau's stories deal with the problem faced by *tamasha* artistes. However, as in many of his other stories, Annabhau brings out the futile but common realities, of greed, pride and malice that exist even between those caught within the exploitative mores of modernity. *Vaijayanta* focuses on the problems faced by Tamasha artists. Although the Tamasha artist features in many of Annabhau's stories and poems, in *Vaijayanta*, Annabhau deals with the lives of these women exclusively. This has been accepted as the first novel in Marathi dealing with this theme. *Kolatacha Por*, a novel that was published a few years ago in Marathi shows a recent growth of interest in the lives and struggles of *tamasha* artistes. *Vaijayanta* depicts how women artists in tamasha are sexually, socially, financially and emotionally exploited and how most of them enter this profession out of sheer helplessness.

Gajarabai has been a *tamasha* danseuse all her life. As she gets old, she is naturally unable to perform her dance with as much agility as she used to when she was young. Consequently, she is publicly insulted and jeered at by young rival danseuse namely Chandra. Gajarabai has a daughter namely Vaijayanta. Gajarabai had sworn not to subject her daughter to the trails and tribulation that she was subjected to as a *tamasha* dancer. However, just to seek revenge on Chandra by defeating her in dancing, she asks her daughter to dance in a *tamasha* performance only once and to 'defeat' Chandra. Merely to satisfy her mother, Vaijayanta dances and defeats Chandra. Later, due to financial constraints as well as seeking emotional revenge on those who rejected her as a decent woman after her first dance, she starts dancing regularly. However, after a number of turns she is to be married to one Uma and there is a prospect of a happy end of her life.

The story delves extensively into how the female body is traded as a commodity and how the awareness of the currency of a young and supple body is taken as a given business fact. The detachment and loss that Gajrabhai feels when she recognises age is working against her is used by Annabhau to delve into issues such as sense of self, the value of a concept like sense of self when faced with the restricting conditions of poverty and dependence.

The story is set in the backdrop of the exploiter, the buyers of the bodies and the dance of Gajarabai, Vaijayanta and Chandra. The distance and emotionlessness of the new market economy and the consequences of those denied its comforts are portrayed with great effect by Annabhau.

In *Chandan*, Annabhau depicts the courage shown by Chandan, a worker from the slums in Bombay, in order to preserve her physical chastity from the attempts of some villainous characters that are bent upon molesting her. The novel, however, tells two stories: one of Chandan and the other of the unspoken sexuality that pervaded the tightly packed slums of Bombay. The sexuality of the working class is hardly ever portrayed in a light that is not predatorial and Annabhau manages to deal with this theme without either undermining the dark side of it or romanticizing it. V M Mate's novel *Chall*, has after all these years managed to find some of the sensitivity and understanding that Annabhau possessed.

In this back drop of unspoken desire added to the frustrations of exploitative industrial life and the culture of denial that had crept into free India, the story of Chandan is told. At the age of 12, her martial uncle weds her to a laborer. Along with her husband, Jagu, and their son Raja she comes to Bombay in search of employment. But while at work, Jagu dies in an accident and after his death she has to fight tooth and nail to preserve her physical chastity amidst the villains who wanted to have physical relations with her. The novels are a story of how she fights against these villains.

But not all Annabhau's stories have villains. The delicateness with which Annabhau's understanding caresses social reality comes to fore in *Fulpakhru*. The reader begins to see Annabhau's aesthetic not in his representation but in the way he has trained his eye to see.

*Fulpakhru* (Butterfly) is a story depicting the boys in a remand home and their devastating life. Dilip and Gyan, two of the boys from a remand home, deceptively bring Rohani, a village girl, to Bombay falsely promising her a bright future full of jobs and money. They eventually force her to into prostitution when they reach Bombay; it is Dilip, one of the pimps, who describe her as a butterfly to her customer, Jack. She wants out. Fortunately one Raja, who stays in the hut opposite her in the slum, shows his readiness to

marry her, knowing fully well that she was a prostitute and thereby rescue her from the hell-like life of prostitutes.

The story has no villains. Dilip and Gyan, also from the village, arrive in the city to be confronted with a culture that holds no value for human life or labour. Annabhau manages to avoid investing Dilip and Gyan with the power usually attendant to those using women. He shows how it is the discordant paradigm that allows Dilip and Gyan to justify their actions. In the 1950s and 1960s, the trafficking of “fair” women from villages into the metropolis was a fine art. Taught the art of seduction in the city, boys would return to the village and woo pretty young women and whisk them off to the city with the promise of a better life. That Annabhau is able to show the entrapment of the predator in the capitalist food chain is an amazing credit.

Annabhau’s love stories are in a class by themselves. All of Annabhau’s love stories always have social realities as a major character. Annabhau uses love as another tool of community building, of strength, of moral support. Rarely is it celebrated as an institution in itself. It seems to me that this is not because Annabhau does not wish to celebrate love as an institution in itself. He recognises that no such social space exists where any facet of the marginalised persons social life is left untouched or is protected from the exploitative world that it can be celebrated in and of itself.

*Alguj, Rupa, Aaghat and Murti* provide us with the spectrum that his love stories cover. *Alguj* (Flute) is the love story of Rangu and her lover Bapu Khawate. Rangu is the daughter of rich and respected farmer namely Ganu Mohite. Bapu on the other hand is very poor and only a servant in Ganu Mohite’s house. But Rangu is very fond of Bapu’s skill in playing the *Alguj*. It is this fondness that eventually turns into love. After going through the usual orders of a love story, at last they succeed in getting married.

However the story is not just a love story. Love here is used in a sense as a metaphor for the spirit. The spirit possessed by those who toil, those who create. The contrast between the life of Ganu Mohite, which is opulent and powerful but devoid a sense of fulfillment, and of the lovers, with no material recourses to command but full of a sense of life and hope is glaring.

*Rupa* has the usual motion picture like love triangle that consists of Rupa (the heroine), Dinkar (the hero) and Gaja Nanagare (the villain). In between these characters lies Mithabai who is a round character in the sense that in the beginning she helps Gaja to get Rupa for him. But when she is beaten by Dinkar and is a failure due to circumstances, she



changes sides and starts helping Dinkar and Rupa who wanted to get married and who fulfill their desire in the end.

The story is about circumstance and about how social mores and the promise of profits squew judgment and morality. It is also in a sense of the Annabhau's reflection on the comprador class and how in a sense its allegiance is crucial to any sort of social change.

*Aaghat* (Wound) makes use of the flashback technique. It ends with a love affair and registered marriage between Sham and Rosy. It is also a portrait of a Bombay slum with its various facets, criminality, jealousy, and of course, good-heatedness. Sham, the central character comes to Bombay settles down in a slum, works as a painter, earns enough to cater to his own and his family's needs and lives quite happily. But out of feminine jealousy, his neighbour, Takawali, burns Sham's wife Rosy. However, it is Rosy's love that helps him to overcome the blow and to come to a normal way of life.

The story in a sense is a change from Annabhau's usual themes. The bonds of community and relation are shown as crucial for the survival of the class as a whole. The story is also an exploration into the social possibilities open to the slum dwellers both in terms of social institutions and in terms of social norms.

*Murti* advocates inter-caste marriage and breaking of caste barriers by the youth. The story of the novel revolves around Vasant, a school-boy and a sensitive parentless artist-painter who falls in love with Murti, his classmate, a girl from an upper caste. In the end, they get married in spite of being from different castes.

Like his love stories, Annabhau created separate niche for himself in his novels about heroes that arose from exploitative conditions. *Bandawala*, *Ramoshi*, *Sultan*, *Dongarcha Raja* and *Farari* although a lot like *Nilu Mang* in one sense, the stories are always about retribution and justice and victory. These stories leave us with a Dalit mythology, a location from which a history that was written as criminalized and amoral has been recovered into a history of heroism. Where the struggles for food in hunger are not written as theft. Where the recourse to dacoity is not seen as criminal but as nationalistic. These stories provide us with an understanding of Annabhau's conception of history and of his role in its creation. In stories like *Bandawala* (Rebel), we come across a male character from the Mang community who stands against injustice. The central theme of the story could be summarized thus: One Inamdar (a landlord) grabs eighty bighas (hectares) of land of an innocent Mang in exchange for a very paltry amount. For two generations, the land remains in the possession of the Inamdars. Taty, grandson of the Mang who mortgaged the land, tries to free it from the clutches of the Inamdar. During the course of his attempts to do so he is sent to jail under the

false charges of attempting to attack and murder the Inamdar. When all humble and legal ways of getting the land back proves futile Tatya turns a rebel.

*Ramoshi* shows how in a quarrel between two arrogant feudal lords, the lives of the poor, honest, innocent peoples are unnecessarily crushed, how the government machinery has been corrupted and how this plight forces a common, sensitive man to take the law into his hands. It is a story of how Yamaji Ramoshi, an honest proctor of a village namely Madan, seeks revenge of one Tatya Dongare, a feudal lord and the killer of Yamaji's only son, Khandu, and how in order to save Tatay, his relatives attempt to grease the plans of law and order department. Yamaji on hearing this loses faith in the law and order machinery and takes up arms and kills the absconding Tatya in the jungles.

The story is in the genre of Annabhau's revolutionary novels. The failure and corruption of the legal and state mechanism as being unproductive for the lower castes and the working classes is a theme that reoccurs in Annabhau's time and again.

The novel *Sultan* deals with a person's life-long struggle for, and failure to, just fill his belly. It is this situation that works towards marginalizing him from normal life. Although the central character of the story was called Sultan, he was actually a penniless, hungry wretch. The story shows that man strives ultimately; to fulfill his basic needs food, clothing, and shelter. A common man attempts to lead his life honestly, tolerantly and within the framework of the morals sanitized by the society. But when he realizes that even after doing all this he cannot even fill his belly, the mad hungry person is left with no alternative but to resort to revolt and when he prepares himself to face the inevitable struggle for existence, he does not meet the killer. The walls of the jails and laws crumple before his revolt and he gets his rights. The author recommends rebellion over meek submission.

*Dongarcha Raja* (King of mountains) and *Jivant kadtus* also appear under the title *Savla Mang* and in the collection entitled *Krishnasksthachya Katha* (Stories of the bank of the Krishna), the same character of Savla appears also in his most popular novel *Phakira*. Like many other stories *Dongarcha Raja* is also set against the backdrop of the Indian struggle for independence. It shows how Savla and his associates like Nilu, Phakira, Pira, Chimma, Ghonchikar, Bali, and Bhiva of Khujagaion in Warna valley (Western Maharashtra) had revolted against British rule in India.

The story speaks for Savla's nobility of head and heart, of his courage, moral uprightness, sympathy for the oppressed and antipathy towards the oppressor. Savla is shown to be having all these virtues in him in spite of the social structure having given him a position on the last rung of the ladder of social status.

In *Farari* (Absconding), we have a brave and sentimental central character namely Shiva whose father-in-law, Yamaji Mang is a villain. Shiva and Yamaji quarrel with each other. In this belligerent mood, Shiva goes to the shoemaker of his village who he had paid two rupees four months ago for making a new pair of *chappals*. But the shoemaker had still not made them. Consequently, Shiva is enraged. He was already angry with his father-in-law and now the shoemaker has also insulted him by not making the pair of *chappals* and also by speaking arrogantly. An angered Shiva beats the shoemaker seriously and then absconds fearing arrest. However, he is arrested, tried and sentenced to twelve years of imprisonment. After he is released from the prison, he finds that his family life is in a mess. His father-in-law has forced his daughter, Shiva's wife Yesu, to marry somebody else and she has begotten a child by her second husband. After coming out of the prison when Shiva finds this, he goes to Yesu and since their love was very deep, he brings her back although she had married another man and had delivered his baby. The story is intended to show that those who beat and murder other human beings are capable of being sentimental and sensible. They turn beaters and murders not because they like it but because of the compulsion of circumstances.

Being a Dalit is not so much based on a shared language, shared cultural identities or shared greatness. It is based essentially on the Dalit experience; the sense that that binds the community is not so much that one is genetically from that community, but that one has lived through that community. The Dalit identity and his experience are inalienable. This experience is the backbone of Annabhau's writings. It creates a literary space for the expression of this experience.

It is worth our while to spend some time on the problematic thrown up by attempts to represent this experience. It is an experience that has been denied access to any form of legitimacy. Literary or otherwise. It has been represented as a stagnant experience. Seeing no motion, no change across centuries. It is a subsidiary experience. It is not an experience that has experienced renaissance. It is not an experience that has codified its aesthetic, its meaning of beauty, whether or not beauty is understood in the same manner. It is such an experience that forms the underlying theme of Annabhau Sathe's work. And it is no mean task to represent such an experience.

From the perspective of today the descriptions and characters that fill Annabhau's writing may seem commonplace. But when he was writing he was dealing with a people who had till date received only pity or contempt. Never individuality, forget heroism, assuming they ever made it to the peripheries of art.

Annabhau manages this attempt at representation without trivializing or undermining his subject. What he is primarily effecting is a dialectic between literature and the imperatives of nascent Dalit activism. He allows concessions to literature, he uses romanticism, accepted aesthetics (scenic beauty, feminine grace etc), celebrated traits of heroism and such like. However, he also bends literature to suit its new functionality as a tool of Dalit experience-representation. He uses characters in forms uncommon to traditional narrative discourse, his heroes are villains and his villains, victims. His plots are non-plots and most importantly he takes literature out of a passive creator of identity and ideas and pumps it full of political vigour and social critique.

He is also constantly performing a self-reflexive role for literature. He uses concepts like beauty and discards them as meaningless in the squalour of reality. He uses concepts like morality to show the poverty of such a concept in the face of hunger. While he is using literature to change the understanding of the Dalit self, he is also irreversibly changing the way literature (and the performing arts) understand their component assumptions.

Following from this is the idea of power that flows through his works. Annabhau excavates the value of bargaining from its mercantile and diplomatic strongholds and restores it to its location in survival. He at once dynamises the location of the Dalit. From a subject of constant and static oppression and a passive acceptor of this oppression, the Dalit in Annabhau's hands is recognized as constantly negotiating his fate; compromising, demanding, revolting, resenting. Over the body of his works he manages to subtly transform this re-found value into a right. A right that is at once empowering because it is not conferred, it is not new, but it draws on an inherent capacity, honed over generations in the most trying circumstances. The value of such a move on Annabhau's part is still being realized especially in the current political arena. Taking this understanding a step further Annabhau constantly reiterates that the Dalits will not be granted concessions in anyway. The theme of demanding and struggling for rights is found in a lot of his works.

Annabhau is also (re)writing history. Historical themes proliferate his works. He uses history as a tool, as a comrade in the peoples' movement. The Marxist themes in his writing are there for all to see. Exploitation and the relations of production form the backdrop, indeed integral parts of most of his work. Worker-capitalist relations and worker struggles are highly recurrent themes in his work.

However, there is a diversion from the traditionalist Marxist artist role, although he makes no bones about using art as a weapon of class solidarity, he is also involved in creating

a mythology of the Dalits and the working class. Annabhau is also involved extensively in a critique of the state; not just its functioning but also its composition.

A conscious attempt to renegotiate the histories and present realities of Dalit women form a large part of Annabhau's literary enterprise. His women characters are not inspirations in the strict sense of the word. They are the recognition, indeed the foundation of the creation, of a new empowering identity. It is interesting that his female characters are never in the past. Always is the present, always dynamic. But Annabhau does dabble with hero making. Using a fine blend of history and fiction he is able to create a theology, a disparate but clearly defined code of inspirations and assumptions, of responsibilities and rights and more importantly of a distinct morality.

This is perhaps the time to add that Annabhau, though nowhere explicitly, treats the caste-class dialectic with great care. He does not dismiss the issue with the traditional Dalits-are-among-other-people-who-are-poor. Even a superficial reading of his writing and viewing of his plays brings to light Annabhau's understanding that it is the Dalit that is poor. This is evident in the areas he focuses on, the castes that form his characters and the conditions from which they negotiate with power.

It is here that the distance between Ambedkar and Annabhau becomes evident. It is painfully close. Although most Maharashtrian Dalit literature is in a sense Ambedkarite literature, it was neither written as or interpreted as possessing Ambedkarite inspirations due to the lack of accesses to theoretical and critical tools that Ambedkar brought. The reasons for this distance shall be addressed in the conclusion of this thesis.

### CHAPTER III

#### Critical analyses of *Makdicha Maal* and *Phakira*

In the first chapter I have tried to re-invent the journey and transformation of a young uneducated man, working in a Bombay labor camp with his father to a prolific Dalit author to someone working in the Marxist-Amberkerite movement as a Dalit activist. The Matunga labour Camp was Annabhau's university during 1930 and 1940, and I have tried to recreate the conditions of his education in the camp in this chapter. I also traced his increased involvement in the leftist movement of Maharashtra, his close social and literary ties with Bombay's slums and the inspiration he provided for the Unified Maharashtra Movement.

The chapter also tried to analyze the various currents in his writing. The immediacy of his work, his use of literature as a positive and negative force and his constant demand for social change through his revolutionary writings. I also laid out the formation of his ideological contexts, explaining that Annabhau was an active participant in the feudal barter system and was able to expose the implicit assumptions and intentions that both ends (the Dalits and the feudal castes) of the system possessed. Most importantly his ability to give his audience/reader a taste of modern experience of untouchability was explained.

In the second chapter, I attempted to classify Annabhau's writing into various genres and themes. I also attempted to classify his work chronologically, but was unable to do so because of methodological constraints. I thereafter tried to create a chronology from the politics of publication that surrounded his work. The chapter also discusses Annabhau's attempt at representing the Dalit experience and the manner in which he deploys morality and infuse his writing with political vigor and social critique. The chapter tried to discern certain component parts and repeated ideas in his work and elaborate them while considering all of Annabhau's writing as a composite body of work.

In the current chapter I would wish to deal with a select few of his texts in greater detail and to focus on the literary aspects of these works. The lens I will use will be the Dalit aesthetic. A man, who had studied only until class four, if that, goes on to produce such a diverse and vast body of work. As the following readings of his texts will show, Annabhau's work was way too nuanced to fit a particular genre or an ideological position. His work is path breaking because it seeks to describe cultures, individuals, people, religion, hopes and desires that were till now collapsed into a single category—untouchable.

To analyze or deconstruct his work is in a sense to miss the point. His theory lies in his description. As does his critique and his analysis. His work takes on even more importance when we consider that the situation and the experiences he is describing were unheard of until then. Although they formed the life experience of those who he was writing about, the barriers of caste prevented both the new middle class and to an extent the feudal castes from recognizing and accepting that these contradictions and nuances.

A lot of theory has been produced regarding the conditions and dynamics of the lives of the Dalits. But never before and perhaps not after Annabhau, has there been such a close, sensitive, honest and informed understanding and representation of the lives and living conditions, both social and psychological of Dalits, nomads and other marginalised groups. It is this creation of a literary space in which the lives of a vast majority of people could be explained and shown to those who were protected from it by the curtains of wealth. Annabhau manages to personalize the categories of the worker, the Dalit and the peasant. Going into the lives of the people, he is not trying to collapse the unique identities, aspirations and life situations of people according to sociological criteria. His manner of writing opens up the complex domain of the literary subject and moves his characters from the position of being literary objects into active literary agents.

The biggest move that he seems to be making is that by describing the lives of his characters in such detail and diversity he is able to shift the literary gaze. He does so by speaking not from a location outside the characters' lives (i.e. being dubbed untouchable by sociologists and reformers alike) but from within the community itself. This enables the reader/audience to recognize and taste first hand, the experiences that lie behind faces that fill out the margins of society.

Adding to this phenomenal achievement, Annabhau's writing manages not only to effectively describe a whole new world, but also to convey a sense of what it is like to live in that world. A major marker of his effectiveness as a writer is in the fact that he is able to create a feeling of what it means to be in the location of his characters. Although the distance between his characters and those who would ultimately read his published works is huge, the sharpness of his writing makes it impossible for the reader to return to the illusion of ignorance.

Adding to this is the importance of the time of his writing. Reading his works in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, one is unable to locate the world he is describing in the shared imaginations we possess about that period (1920 to 1970). The novels, films, photographs, in fact all the

cultural artifacts of the era are so devoid of any reference to Annabhau's subject that one almost sees it as surreal. It is to Annabhau's credit that his novels create, describe and position these worlds so clearly and unromantically that the reader is forced to recognize them and weave them into his cultural imagination.

Added to this is the contemporaneity of his writing. He writes at a time when the internal and external environments of Dalits are undergoing a sea change and are about to transform permanently. By the 1920s, the British colonial apparatus had established itself firmly in India. Institutions such as a formal judicial system, a bureaucratic revenue network, universities, railways and modern banking had made inroads into Indian society and thinking. New roads and railways enriched the increasing commercialization of agricultural and commodity production creating a demand for wage labor and specialized skills and endowing both the growing cities and the countryside with the trappings of modernity. Education in the Western paradigm was slowly becoming more common. Traditional institutions such as caste, religion and the *zamindari* system were being undermined and economic opportunities were being made available to people who had till now been denied access to them. Old agricultural labor and artisans staged other struggles to hold their own against the challenge of volatile new cash crop economics.

The castiest social constitution had been replaced by the IPC and the politics of colonial power had subordinated those who had ruled the roost till then. Dalits were now, although in a limited sense, being given access to a law that treated them as equals and where crime was codified in an universalist manner. All this was occurring in the context of increased discourse of emancipation and awareness of rights, changing social goals and revolutionized ideas of futures. The novel had made its entrance on the Indian literary sphere and ideas of nationalism were abundant. Writers were beginning to create the imagined Indian nation according to the diverse philosophies available to them (liberal, Marxist, religious, socialist etc). All these changes were also being played out in the Marathi literary scene.

By recording spaces where Dalits talk to Dalits, where lives interact, where internal hierarchies play out, where politics and diversity give rise to the possibility of change and solidarity, Annabhau's writing takes the form of a testament to and an introduction of the Dalits.

In doing this he deploys his acute historical sense. His Marxist exposure also imbibes in him a sense of how Dalits have been left out of this history. He is, in a manner speaking,



writing an oral history. The sources he uses are oral, anecdotal. Using these he creates history out of those left out even of the footnotes of mainstream history.

In doing this he transforms his experience, which till now was a tool for survival, into cultural capital that is emancipatory in nature. To this end I hope to look closely at *Makdicha Maal* and *Phakira*, two short novels that seem to be most representative of Annabhau's work. *Makdicha Maal* is most interestingly an attempt at an anthropological study of Dalit communities. The novel enables us to focus on and investigate the manner in which Annabhau portrays these communities. The close and detailed descriptions are an integral part of his writing style. The story is also a good representative of Annabhau's political imperatives. The story brings about themes of alienation, subordination, hunger, madness, relations of production and so on. Most importantly it lays bare the different meanings that different castes give to the world and to morality. The novel given its extensive descriptions of people and relations is an ideal location for an investigation into Annabhau's sense of the Dalit aesthetic and his need to create an autonomous Dalit identity.

*Phakira* on the other hand, is more a historical novel. It is part myth, part history and part autobiography. It allows us to examine the way Annabhau is re-writing history. It is also a good location from which to gauge the dynamics that Annabhau perceived in the political and social interaction between the British administration, the feudal upper castes and the Dalit's.

### *Makdicha Maal*<sup>13</sup>(Monkey Hill)

A close textual reading of *Makdicha Maal* opens up the whole gamut of experiences and social locations that characterize Annabhau's work. The novel was most likely written in the later part of his career as it shows a brashness and poetic license that is unusual even for his work. Published in 1960, this short novel is a living experience.

The novel is about the communities that arrive in a village called Kalgaon during the monsoon. Basically nomadic, Annabhau begins by describing the diversity of castes that congregate at this village: the *Domari*, *Dowri*, *Darweshi*, *Makadwala*, *Saapgarudi*, *Turwale*, *Bhanamathiwale*, *Gosawi*, *Phaseparadi*, *Nandiwale*, *Shikaldar* and so on. The difference in language, occupation, names, gods, etc is brought out to recreate what seems like a carnival of multiculturalism. But their social links are precarious. The novel is about the interactions of each of these communities, both within themselves and with each other. How individuals

<sup>13</sup> Annabhau Sathe, *Makdicha Maal*, Mumbai: Majestic Publication, 1997 )

interact with their communities, with other individuals. Their loves, their fears, their ambitions, their weddings their animals and so on. Annabhau describes each of their lives to the minutest detail, their clothes, their amulets, their language, working almost like a moving picture camera. All these castes live off on animals. Snake charmers, monkey trainers, hunting-dog owners and so on. They eat anything that moves, some with names, some without.

The novel is a series of stories that weave into one another. There is no main plot except one that becomes evident with a discerned reading of all of Annabhau's works. The author's desire to record this face of history.

Each story opens itself out into a canvas of aesthetic locations, social critique, experiential truths and unusual metaphor. Each story is linked to the other in a variety of ways. They form chains or sequences of experience and social behavior. This has the effect of creating both continuity and discontinuity in the manner in which his characters are perceived.

The main theme (if there is one) of the story is about the close links between men and animals. Annabhau uses this link in many ways. Firstly, he uses this link to show how entwined the lives of animals are with the people who work with them. A series of incidents paint this relation. In one episode, the snake of the snake charmer, Hikmya, escapes, and ends up in the monkey trainer, Yanku's, house. Yanku kills the snake. But these are not devoid of the pathos of interaction as is seen in the following quote.

Yanku has killed my snake," Hikmaya tells the village Patil.  
 "What do I eat now?" The Patil turns to Yanku. "The snake entered my shanty. It could have bitten my child. I had to kill it," Yanku says. "Impossible," bursts Hikmaya. "Sarkar, my snake didn't have fangs, I had removed them long ago. My snake was as gentle as a lamb."<sup>14</sup>

Annabhau describes the grief that Hikmya feels in a manner that collapses both the productive and emotive fields. Comparing his sense of loss to the loss of a highly productive cow, Annabhau paints Hikmya's pain as being both linked to the severance of his link to a livelihood and as the end of a relationship marked by labour, patience, time, risk and compassion that was invested in the "charming" of the snake. This is complemented by the

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<sup>14</sup> ibid. P 9

emotions that flood Yanku's mind when he encounters the snake in his house and the immediate need to protect his monkeys.

The emotions are subtle, speaking not of generalities of attachment or love. The relations are specific. Yanku's love for his monkey's does not extend to Hikmya's snakes and neither the other way round. Bringing this into sharp focus is the animosity that is created between Hikmya and Yanku. This leads to an interesting blurring of the ideas of humanity, allegiance, brotherhood and so on.

This in a way leads to the second set of links that Annabhau makes in the story. A village Patil, or landlord, observes on a walk outside the village, a group of children behaving in a suspicious manner. He stops to see what they are doing. They sit behind bushes, silently staring intently at something in a clearing. The Patil moves closer and discovers that the object in the clearing is a carcass. Curious, he waits. Soon a vulture begins to circle and descends of the carcass and into the trap laid by the children, who kill the bird instantly. Shocked the Patil moves on.

The instance sears through the reader's imagination. Annabhau is signifying three relations. The first of the entwined involvement of the children in the animal food chain. Annabhau uses this episode to expose another of the links between animals and their crucial part in human survival. The episode also creates dimensions to the concept of scavenger leaving the reader with mixed images of the carcass, the vulture and the children, each separated from death only by time, and each living off death.

Annabhau also plays on the reader's ideas of the animal (as opposed to the human) to expose the insulation of the concept from social reality. The Patil's reactions, first of curiosity and then of shock, reveal his disconnectedness and ignorance of the lives of the children. Insulated by wealth, and the morality of a full stomach, he is able to dwell on ideas of humanity and the limits of it.

Thirdly, Annabhau opens up the dimension in the man/animal link that distinguishes the fact of living from any sentimentality about life. The same Patil arrives on the *maal*<sup>15</sup>, with a group of villagers. He arrives to confront an old nomad who the village suspects of having eaten a monkey. The villagers drag the old man to the village square where the people of the hill and the village gather to see the trail.

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<sup>15</sup> The hill, is where these nomadic people live, outside the village but near enough for them to earn their living from there. The relevance of Annabhau's use of the village and the hill and contrasting metaphors shall be brought out further on.

The Patil accuses the old man of killing and eating a monkey. The lowness and insensitivity of the action appalls the Patil. The monkey is seen as an incarnation of Maruthi (the devotee of Ram). The Patil sees the old man's action as a sin, calling the old man a devil.

"What kind of people are you," asks the Patil

"We are Gosawi<sup>16</sup> *Sarkar*," says the old man rising.

"Who do you worship?"

"We are devotees of Ram, Master."

"Who Ram?"

"Dasharth's Ram."

"Who was Maruthi?"

"A devotee of Ram."

"What are monkey's then?" booms the Patil at the assembled *Gosais*. One old man gathers his courage and replies,

"They are incarnations of Maruthi, *Sarkar*."

Jumping on this triumphantly, the Patil shouts "So then you how kill and eat them, are you men or sons of Ravan?"

"Answer!" the Patil screams at them. The *Gosais* cower away from him.

Slowly another old man rises.

"*Sarkar*, It was Lord Ram himself who ordained that we eat the monkeys."

Irritation and anger boil over in the Patil.

"How can he have ordained such? Show me this Ram who has ordained the killing of Maruthi."

"Forgive us, *Sarkar*," says an old *Gosawi* clutching his stomach. "This stomach doesn't listen. The Ram that tells us to eat the monkeys is this stomach. We made a mistake. But it was out of hunger."<sup>17</sup>

The episode is in its description. Annabhau contrasts the Patil's wealth and social standing with the poverty and desperation of the old man. He also contrast the moral

<sup>16</sup> A marginalised community that survives by begging

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.* page 22

indignation and disgust of the Patil with the old man's dual reality (the old man recognises the Patil's gods and the discourse that surrounds them but on the other hand is unable to relate the Patil's taboos with his social realities.)

The episode brings out, more than anything else, the expression of the Patil and the old man. The old man has about him a certain sense of finality, a matter-of-factness which comes out in the apparently tongue-in-cheek answers he gives the Patil. Annabhau contrasts this with the Patil's stubbornness surrounding his ideas and the Patil's inability to recognize need and the Patil's need to term the old man as a lost cause so as to not disturb his own world view.

Annabhau, in this episode, adds to the man/animal metaphor a third dimension. Having earlier explained the relation on the lines of sentimentality or attachment born of need, he now contrasts this with sentimentality born of leisure and wealth and exposes this sentimentality about life by placing it in conflict with the human need to survive.

The fourth dimension to this metaphor is brought out in the incidents following from Pariya's hunting dog's madness. One of Pariya's dogs turns rabid and runs amok on the *Maal* spreading terror. Pariya, drunk, gleans much enjoyment from the scene, comparing his dog to a lion and forbidding anyone from harming the dog. Finally Yanku kills the dog. Pariya in turn breaks Yanku's leg. This leads to a small riot. The Patil turns up to mediate and can't believe that the ruckus was caused over a dog.

Annabhau, in describing the incidents lays bare the violence that underlies the precarious existences of these people. Pariya's reaction to Yanku killing his dog, which was no longer of use to him, places Pariya almost in parity with the dog. The mixing of these two levels of existence is enabled when Annabhau introduces the Patil's gaze. The Patil also sees the whole episode as being below dignified and rational human behaviour. Having already defined the limits of the Patil's understanding of the survival conditions of the *Maal* people, Annabhau's description of the incident leaves the problems of defining behaviour and "humanness" open to doubt and thought.

The village and the *maal* are two really important characters in *Maakdicha Maal*. Annabhau's descriptions of life on the *maal* lays out a morality, an understanding of life, a way of living, a relation with death, an aesthetic that draws its meaning from its location in the present, in survival. This he compares with the village. With permanence. With landholding, established customs, sanctified gods and a morality of ideas, not of means. The village is also defined. It is separate, distinct from nature and the *maal*. This geographic

distance also allows for a social distance, a distance from where it is possible for the villagers not to see, or even if they see to ignore or treat as discrepancies, the brutal realities of those living close to nature.

This distance also, in Annabhau's construction, allows for space to deploy mechanisms for exploitation and regulation that are slowly institutionalized. Exploring patriarchal violence, suppressed sexuality and the mechanisms of dispensing justice, Annabhau shows how the village deviates further and further from real sense of truth, justice and compassion as it formalizes patterns of exploitation.

But what stands out most in the story is the manner in which Annabhau describes the texture of what survival means to the people of the *maal*. He is in no way frugal with the manner in which he describes the colour in their lives, the vibrancy of their loves or the passion that infuses their relationships. But underlying it Annabhau creates a pain, a massive encompassing pain, that forms the soil from which the will to live grows. This soil lends its colour and taste to the power and drive with which the people walk the thin line between life and death, between another day and starvation. It is this pain that allows them hope. That doesn't let circumstance stop them from finding beauty. That enables excellence and risk taking, and most of all that infuses them with the wisdom of life, and the confidence of it.

### ***Phakira***

*Phakira* is undoubtedly Annabhau Sathe's most popular work. It has been made into award winning movies and has inspired generation after generation of people to the extent that even children are named Phakira (Much like they are named Lenin or Stalin). The novel has been translated into Hindi and Punjabi. Phakira is a historical novel, but more so than most of Annabhau's other works. All Annabhau's works are historical in nature in that they seek to record experience. The characters are usually fictional but in Phakira's case the protagonist is a real historical figure.

Phakira was the maternal uncle of Annabhau. It was said that when Annabhau was born, Phakira, on the run from the law, came to his house and asked to see his sister, Annabhau's mother. On hearing that his sister had given birth to a boy, Phakira is said to have left stolen gold sovereigns for the upkeep of young Annabhau. But Annabhau doesn't feature in this novel.

The novel also traces the caste histories of the prevailing castes in the Warna valley of Western Maharashtra. It tells of the Brahmins, the Marathas, the Mangs and the Mahars. It also

traces the cultural history of the region. The Warna valley, Maharashtra's most fertile area, allowed for the development of a colourful and diverse cultural life. Central to this was the *Jathra*, or fair, that was not only the main cultural event of the area it was also a source of major revenue for the non-landed classes. The *Jathra* would arrive only at the village where the *Jogini*<sup>18</sup> resided.

Although the main story line is that of Phakira, several small stories fill out the novel. The novel tells of the story of the Mangs. It is within this story that the story of Phakira is sketched. Annabhau describes the Mangs semi-invisible existence on the edges of village life. A line from the novel that no one knew how many people lived in the Mang wada<sup>21</sup>, or how they eked out an existence tells the tale.

Since before the coming of the British, the Mangs, Mahars, etc were seen as criminal castes. When there was a crime in the village the suspicion immediately fell on them. It came to be that these castes were given charge of the security of the village. Annabhau doesn't miss the irony of the fact that those with almost no means of survival were left to protect the lives and property of the very people who denied them these means.

Another location of irony that Annabhau creates is the monsoon. A season of celebration for those that possess land, it is a season of despair for those who do not. Rains mean no work. It is said that with the first rains, tears fall from the Mangs' eyes. These two ironies are used as interesting plot devices by Annabhau in the novel.

The novel begins with the story of Phakira's father, Ranoji Mang. It tells of how he tries to steal the *Jogini* from another village (Shivni) in order that the *jathra* comes to his village (Wategaon). He is caught and murdered by the people of the other village. Here Annabhau introduces Shankarao Patil. A kind and generous landlord, who discovers the truth behind Ranoji's actions and takes the upbringing of his son and the welfare of Ranoji's wife into his own hands.

The story goes on to describe the upbringing of Phakira by his mother. The novel describes his growth through the eyes of his doting mother. It is an interesting move on the part of Annabhau, to introduce, as a protagonist, the mother whose perspective rarely was represented. No doubt a certain romanticizing of the son occurs but even this romanticizing is reflective of her gaze. A comparison immediately springs to mind. Sane Guruji's *Shyamchi*

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<sup>18</sup> grill

*Aai*<sup>19</sup> comes out as a neat parallel for Annabhau's work, representing a whole new world and a whole new mother.

Growing up hearing about his father's deeds, Phakira decides to live up to his name. He steals the *Jogini* and returns to the village, instantly becoming a hero. Needless to say a feud ensues between the two villages. The *jathra* comes to the village. Phakira's standing in the eyes of the villagers rises.

The novel leaves this temporary happiness to return the poverty of the Mang community in the village. Annabhau emphasis on the imperatives of survival guiding most of the actions of the Dalits emerges yet again. Hunger strikes again and to starve it off Phakira steals a little grain. The landlords of Shivni report the matter to the colonial authorities. Phakira goes on the run. The colonial administration begins harassing his family and his community.

Another character, the Kulkarni, the village representative of the colonial administration, is portrayed as being sympathetic to the Dalits. In time of famine, he encourages Phakira to rob in order to survive. Phakira goes on to loot the British Treasury and the colonial administration goes after him with all its might. They are unable to catch him and stories of his legend grow. With stories of his legend also grow the stories of one of his friends, Sattu Bhosle. But when the Administration imprisons his whole community, he decides to surrender.

What ensues is a dialogue between the British officer and Phakira. The face-off is constructed as between an agent of need and a representative of order. Phakira's appeals are to natural justice and the officers references are to state law. Annabhau doesn't resolve the novel, he leaves this confrontation unfinished, but not without vesting it with the colours of reality. There is no doubt who is in power. Conversely, Annabhau leaves no doubt as to who is right. The novel ends with a reflection by Phakira's mother on how Phakira used to steal out of his house to go observe how the British cantonment lived from afar in his childhood and how now he has returned on horse back to observe how the same cantonment does justice.

The recurrent theme of justice underlies most of Annabhau's novels. Annabhau almost always posits justice as a tension between two contending variants. The law and the real. The law always requires an agent to apply to. A criminal, a petitioner, a defendant.

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<sup>19</sup> A story of a poor Brahmin boy and his mother and the story of how begging negotiates with their social mores.



Annabhau works into this concrete singularity intangibles such as poverty, discrimination and social justice thereby raising questions such as how does one incriminate poverty. More importantly, especially in Phakira and the British officer's speech, Annabhau seems to ask how does one understand the singularity of the law.

This contradiction is further brought into play by the character of Kulkarni. Unable to address the problems of the starving Mangs, Kulkarni advises them to do whatever they can to survive. Annabhau exposes the incompleteness of the umbrella of law. The Kulkarni, a representative of the colonial apparatus, is asking the Mangs to break the law. The recognition of the inability of the law to serve its purpose is not only with those at the receiving end but even with those who enforce the law.

The dialectics between heroism and hunger also emerge through out the play. Annabhau is very clear in his portrayal of heroism. In no place does he let it slip into foolhardy-ness. Annabhau, by contrasting various characters from different social circumstances and laying their actions in similar circumstances side-by-side creates a perspective on poverty and the effects it has on man. The novel is an undoubted and successful attempt at immortalizing Phakira. Till date statues of Annabhau are shown carrying this novel.

The life I live, see and experience is the life I write about. No bird am I to fly on the wings of fantasy. I am a frog, close to the ground... When Barbariya's ear was cut off, I was sitting in the dark and watching... Sultan, Bhomkiya, and I were in Amravathi jail all facing murder charges... Mukul Mulani still calls me mama (uncle)... The Tuka who ate the donkey out of anger is still alive... All my characters are real, Alive.<sup>20</sup>

In just 49 years of life and in that writing for just 20 years, Annabhau created 40 novels; 100-150 short stories; *Inamdar*, *Pengyache Lagin*, and a few other grounded realist plays; eleven or so street plays like *Akliche Ghost*; *Stalingradcha Povada*, *Maharashtra povada*, *Mazi maina gavar rahili* and other songs and lavinis created a storm in Maharashtra. *Kapriya Chor*, *Chitra* and others novels were translated to Russian, Kannada and Polish. *Warnichiya Koriyath* found its way into Gujarathi, *Phakira* found more fame in Hindi and Punjabi. *Alguj*, *Awdi*, *Makdicha Maal*, *Chiklatil Kamd*, *Warnecha Wag*, *Baragavache Pani*

<sup>20</sup> Annabhau Sathe, (*Barbadhya Kanjari*, Pune: Vidyarathi Graha Publication, 1960) 6. (In the introduction to a collection of short stories. Marathi into English is mine translation.)

were realized on the silver screen. *Maza Russiacha Pravas*, gave a worker's eye to the travelogue.

Barbadhiya Kanjari, Nilu Mang, Bhomkiya, Bilwari, Tukiya, Sapyia, Mukul Mulani, Ranoji, Naru, Sawla Mang, Bhoma, Komdi Chor, Ramu, Gangaram Mahut, Vishnu Pant Kulkarni, Malu Dhekna, Ramnak Mahar, Gita, Meera, Rupa, Ladi, Chili, Abi, Bhanamathi and so many more enter our world with so many questions, so much experience. All these works, all these characters are born out of a struggle to survive and struggle and survive. And survive in a country where dying is becoming cheaper by the day.

In Annabhau's work the ideal and the wired are brought up to view. There is an inherent instability to his characterization, a distinct imbalance between the narrative and the character. It is the imbalance born of a clear recognition of the contradictions and disruptions of modernity. Annabhau had experienced life in amazing variety. But there was a definite limit to his experience of life. This is reflected in the scope of his writing. There is a ceiling to the kind of characters he deploys.

His characters are oppressed, broken, twisted, emaciated, assailed, afraid, traumatized. Far away from caste, religion. Their opinions, morality, language, culture, style are diverse. But they are linked. They are pushed to the edges of society, their lives characterized by the uncertainty of the next hour and they drink such inequality and live. They are all Dalit because they all suffer. Because they all survive.

Annabhau is writing at a time when the literary apparatus was experimenting with new literary values and archetypal constructs. Psychology was influencing the creation of the novel. The new enlightened rational individual had arrived in the Indian novel. Empty homogenous time had begun to tick.

It is no wonder then that Annabhau's writing may seem a tad immature, his characterization romantic and his novels unbalanced, refusing to conform to the perceived stability of the modern. However it is Annabhau's exemplary recognition of morality, that distinguishes his work from his contemporaries. Like Mahatma Phule, another writer not invested with the tools of the time, and yet who created a consciousness, an understanding of god, based on his experienced morality, Annabhau writings also reflect a morality wrought of experience.

His characters are not simply literally esthetical, they are not just brave, beautiful, poor, wicked. They are all painted by the journey of life that they are on. All his writing are dialectic between literature and literary activism. Although Annabhau believed completely in

the communist ideology, his writings were not peopled with communist heroes. His land is not red. His horses are not red. The rain is not red. His characters did not feel communist emotions, his villains were not always capitalist crooks. His stories were about the lives of those around him. They were about a poverty so poor and an oppression so harsh that he did not need an ideology to make his point. All he needed was a mirror. And his works reflect the realities clearly and the realities demand change more strongly than any ideology.

## CHAPTER IV

### Locating Annabhau: From Marx to Ambedkar

As has been shown in the previous chapters, Annabhau's work is a reflection of his life's experience. The existential reality of suffering, hardship, exploitation and deprivation that surrounded his life was a crucial influence both on the nature and content of his writing. Most readings of Annabhau's work had fixed Marxist meanings to the situations he deploys. Annabhau uses the Marxist paradigm to locate his realities; there is no doubt about this. It is my contention however that the dominance of Marxist meanings that have marked Annabhau's texts and their understanding are not the only way of making meaning in Annabhau.

The attempt of this concluding chapter will be to deconstruct the imperatives of a class-based understanding of his work and to open up the caste dynamics of his work. The caste-class binary in literature and in political theory has been one that has been fiercely contested. The deployment of caste into the otherwise "whole" and "stable" category of class has met with much resistance from the literary and political world for a variety of reasons. But before I venture in to the existing conflicts in this domain, I would seek to sketch a brief history, both spatially and temporally, of the domain.

Between 1920s and 1940s, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar accepted most of the economic analysis of Marxism and even attempted to organise along these lines creating radical movements of depressed classes against upper-caste landlords. Allying with the Communist-led working class struggle during this time, his programmes and speeches, as reported in his mouthpiece *Janata*, indicate that he accepted broadly the Marxist analysis of class struggle so far as economic issues were concerned. What this led to, though, was a kind of dual system of exploitation. One to be fought by class struggle, the other by caste struggle. As he put in his famous address to the Mahar railway workers in Mahad:

There are in my view, two enemies, which the workers of this country have to deal with. The two enemies are Brahminism and capitalism. By Brahminism I do not mean, the power, privilege and interest of the Brahmins as a community. By Brahminism 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 though they have been the origin of it.

<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> As reported in the Times of India 14 February 1938.

Ambedkar made a severe critique of capitalism and called for the nationalization of land and basic industries, explicitly calling it 'State Socialism'. In a sense, the term State Socialism indicates his difference with the Communists in that it contrasts with the revolution under working class leadership. State ownership was to be written into a democratic constitution. At another level, the phrase simply made the assumption of a mechanical Marxism, that socialism of collective ownership of the means of production was equivalent to state ownership.

There were, however many problems with the dual system of Brahminism and capitalism. The connection between these two was not clear. The problem of dual system theory remained. Seeing separate systems of class and caste exploitation left unchallenged the mechanical Marxist assumption of a class analysis and accepted the idea that class dealt with the economic issues while the caste system of exploitation was at a cultural and ideological level.

Dual system theory could not give an integrated holistic explanation. It reflected Ambedkar's initial grappling with Marxism when he insisted that caste be added to a class approach as the Marxist approach did not develop an overall alternative theory. Intrinsic to any understanding of this domain of contention is the relation between the mode of production and the caste system. The poor, in India as in any country, are not a secular formation. They bear the marks of a particular community; in this case, they are Dalits. The division of labour was not on the basis of the possession of capital. It was deployed by writ, by holy, inaccessible writ. There was no space for mobility. Neither vertically nor horizontally. This can be seen, as is seen, as just an expansion of the category of class, giving it another name. What is left out in such an understanding is fact that any negotiation with this category (of caste) is no longer readily available for clear economic or political deployment. The social category of caste stands out refusing to be explained either by political or by economic criteria.

Bearing the caste marks prevent Annabhau from explaining away the social as a deviation in the economic, as subsidiary to it, as something whose resolution is linked simply to the resolution of the political and the economic contradictions as laid down by the Marxists. This awareness of the caste problem makes it possible for us to find meanings in Annabhau's writing that are not simply "liberal-left" but that try and incorporate an understanding of the unique caste experience.

It must be said over here that Annabhau is more than aware of the importance of these various categories (i.e. social, political, economic, national etc). He, therefore, evokes the

Indian against the colonial, the worker against the capitalist, the Dalit against the Brahmin. This does not mean he accepts these categories as unproblematic. In locations of conflict (such as when he is trying to portray the different social understandings of the Brahmins and the Dalits) he is adept at deploying these various social categories as coherent concepts depending on need and narrative imperative. He also, in locations of community (for example when he is discussing issues of superstition among the Dalits), problematizes and deconstructs these categories. So although he is invoking the left-liberal enlightenment paradigm when he is seeking a location from which to combat Brahminical discourses, he is almost simultaneously deconstructing the paradigm, laying bare its contradictions and problems that exist in the creation of a Dalit identity.

To see such moves on his part as contradictory is of no functional use. The moves are dynamically innovative. This double play of evoking and deconstructing can be seen as the tension between class-caste tensions that keep his work alive, and meaningful, till today.

A main location where I shall attempt to place Annabhau's contestation of the Marxist paradigm is the manner in which the paradigm sets up concepts such as truth and ideals. Hegel, like Marx, sees the development of history, (social, political and economic) as constantly progressing further through the dialectic process of binary oppositions (thesis and antithesis) resolving itself in a synthesis, higher and higher till an ideal (or utopia in Marx's case) is reached.

Although Annabhau deploys the possibilities enabled by this process, time and again his works leave the field of play unresolved. It can be said that his attempt is not in resolution (either of social or narrative contradictions) but simply in the mapping of these contradictions. Many stories such as *Walan*, *Vaijayanta*, do not offer the reader narrative resolutions. They are neither parables nor are they sarcastic critiques. It is not blasphemous for him to map contradictions onto the locations of resistance. It is a reflection of the truth he perceives. Truth that is marked by his caste experience.

Another location of the class-caste interrelation is seen in the overlapping of production relations and social relations. Caste relations are born out of the village barter system. Each person or community is located in a particular relation of production. In the Gandhian way of seeing, the production relations were not themselves problematic. It was only a minor problem of untouchability that needed to be weeded out. However, Ambedkar sees the Gandhi's village swaraj as a "garbage bin of pride". Annabhau also has no illusions about the fact that the caste system has outlived its utility that it is a concept not worth re-energizing or saving. His conviction becomes clear in the manner in which he shows his

characters as limited by their location in the relations of production and how their knowledge is limited to their social space. Even if a Dalit was able to read, the caste relations encrust themselves around the meaning-making mind to prevent any unfixing of meaning and therefore keeping him trapped in superstition and social hierarchies.

Annabhau negotiates this through his writings. A direct response to the fact that knowledge is not equally accessible and available (not simply logistically but also intellectually) to all. Differing from the Marxist mode of the universal, he deploys the local in the following manner: There is a spiritualness of the moral view as developed in the writing of Annabhau and even of Phule. Unlike Ambedkar, Annabhau lacked a systematic access to western philosophical capital with which to create discourses of emancipation. It was through an indigenous morality, that developed out of local experience that Annabhau and Phule were able to in a sense spiritualise their writings, giving it meaning beyond substance. And therefore allowing the viewer/reader to be able to access this knowledge, this history, this philosophy, these new politics.

This move is in a sense enabled by the fact that Annabhau's writing never refer to a sublime inner self, a domain that has been denied to Dalits through History. His spirituality is based, in that sense, on the struggle for material existence. This move away from the ideal, pure, holy self, to a self that is defined by production and the struggles of survival, allows Annabhau to bring agency back to a people denied this domain. The heroes of Annabhau's writing are fighting for their own dignity, but they are still making history, both for the present and for the future.

The creation of a spiritual domain, which can be seen as sovereign, as separate from the spiritual domains of Brahmanism, allows for a location from which Dalits and others who are written off from history can agitate. As Partha Chatterjee argues, the Indian nationalist movement can be seen in two phases. The first phase was the creation of a spiritual domain that contained the social. This was created in opposition to "all that was western". It was this location in which tradition was enshrined. It was a location in which the nationalists/reformers would broke no interference from the state (British)<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Post Colonial Histories*, (New Delhi, OUP 1994) p 5

It was from this sovereign location that the nationalists begin to lay claims on the state. Needless to say, this location was Brahmanical. Even though “reforms” were being enacted, it was still fundamentally defined to all by its upper-caste Hindu nature.

Annabhau’s attempt to create a spiritual domain that is not based on a Brahmanical tradition of morals and spirituality allows for Dalits and other marginalised subaltern groups to begin contesting the state. Neither is this spiritual separate/distinct from the enlightenment “ideals”. This is missed completely by Marxist discourse. Marxist historiography is unwilling to concede structural importance to anything other than the economy. There is no demand that ideas or institutions, democracy, individualism, caste, womanhood, equality or the logic that they carry with them be scrutinized, indeed no expectation that any useful evidence will emerge from such scrutiny. Ideas such as reason and social comfort are acknowledged as emerging with the Enlightenment but are dealt with as ideal forms. They are left strangely untouched, let alone structured by caste. Annabhau’s writings constantly scrutinize the ideas and institutions of enlightenment. Democracy is opened to parody time and again. The bureaucracy is in no way seen as independent or just. Even concepts like equality are brought under scrutiny when he describes the social (and caste marks) on those who die in famines, those who live in the squalor of Bombay’s slums.

It is possible to read into Annabhau’s work the creation of contradictions in the objective paradigm of the spiritual-fascist epistemology. Annabhau does this by exposing the limits of the Brahminical feudal world view and polarizing the ideas of the class-caste binary. He makes these moves in many ways, for example, by analyzing the ritualistic nature of societal interaction. By doing this Annabhau helps enable the creating on an alternative epistemology that allows the depressed classes/castes to develop an understanding of the world that promotes for emancipation.

These moves can be seen as working towards creating an autonomous Dalit perspective. Much like as was advocated by Ambedkar, Annabhau contests all attempts made to collapse the unique Dalit social and political perspectives into mainstream discourses, be they Marxist or liberal democratic.

Annabhau refuses to see the mainstream as fixed as a given. It seems like Annabhau agrees with Marx and Engels when they observe:

The ideas of the ruling classes are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force in society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, consequently controls the means of mental production, so that the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are on the whole



subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relations; the dominant material relations grasped the ideas; hence of the relations which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance.<sup>23</sup>

He is aware that the mainstream is created constantly through the interactions of the present. Without the backing of Power these linkages of legitimacy cannot be made, and without the legitimacy of the mainstream Power cannot be legitimized. It is by legitimizing the use of violence that the mainstream polarizes society and controls the life of a person/people (via the caste system). Annabhau sees how the links between the seemingly secular domain of literature and theory and the legitimizing of power come into play and how theory and literature allow for pressure valves, like reforms etc.

Setting these ways of participating in the literary world, Annabhau remains constantly dissatisfied, writing about those who are constantly dissatisfied with the society that structures their permanent dissatisfaction. When the struggle to survive comes up against this frustration (*chid*) Annabhau uses this frustration to expose the tools that are used to dissipate this frustration. Tools such as god, luck, law, equality are deployed time and again to legitimise upper-caste dominance of social relations, of political power and of economic wealth. These are used to keep all those exploited by the mainstream from coming together against it.

These tools maintain the power structure. The mode these tools use is that of exclusion. This exclusion involved an exclusion from history. The subalterns always fought and always lost. And so their history was never written. This exclusion leads to anger and injustice, always suppressed and tricked out of their expression. The Marxists saw the change in modes of production as bringing about changes in the relations between the exploited and the exploiters. But Ambedkar's viewed this in a different manner. The suppressed remained suppressed. Power is crystallized into art, culture and history. This crystallization takes the shape not of the rejection of the suppressed from history but of the relation becoming one of morality. The story of the suppressed becomes an example of deviance that justifies the stabilizing moral order. Thus the images of the Dalit as thief, murderer, sexual predator. This then leads to the political subsuming this "apparent" morality and the subsequent dubbing of entire castes and tribes as criminal.

The Brahminical mainstream is therefore able to negotiate influences (imperatives) of other streams and is therefore able not only to survive but also to thrive on historical

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<sup>23</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *On Literature and Art*, (Moscow, Progress Publishers 1978) p 71

occurrences such as changes in modes of production and colonialism. Refuting at worst and complicating at best class analysis.

This gap between the direction of Annabhau's work and that of his Marxist colleagues, can be explained if we stop seeing the task/activity of Indian novelists and historiographers as writing the biography of the Indian state, but as actually writing the autobiography of the secular Indian self. This way of seeing allows us to examine the uneasiness, and reluctance of Indian novelists and historians to allow caste into the imagined social domain. Annabhau's writing is a move to de-stabilize the narrative of the secular Indian self. It must be said that his move is not replacing the secular Indian self with a castist Indian self. Annabhau is attempting a truly transformative politics. While deconstructing the dominant Brahminical discourse of the secular Indian self by exposing its covering up and marginalising caste discourses, he is also at the same time problematising caste, exposing its limitations and recognizing its restrictive nature. He does not however dismiss it. His experience and the way his reality is structured will not/did not allow him to dismiss the social dynamics of caste. In this we find much resonance with Ambedkar's work. Ambedkar too was reluctant to view the main political agent in India as the secular self. He recognised that the caste dynamic had to be address in order to create real transformative politics.

Annabhau is imagining a nation. His novels help create the empty homogenous time that allow for his readers to imagine their community. The themes of suffering and hardship, deprivation and denial that are mapped onto various regions of Maharashtra, allow for the Dalits of each region to share solidarity, to share experience, to share goals with other Dalits who they have never seen, other Dalits who exist outside the immediate and exploitative space that keeps them captive in their relations of production. And this is not only with the Dalits in Maharashtra. The scope of his imaginary extends from the peasants in Bengal to the Red Army soldiers on the Russo-German war front. All coming together to reinforce the ambitions and goals and responsibilities of each other.

Annabhau can be seen as moving away from the traditional Marxist discourse which states that all that is needed is an awareness of the exploitative relations of production and that this is sufficient to create a revolutionary consciousness. By giving importance to the social (castist) dimension of life, and by realizing that Dalits, in Brahminical discourse have been locked not only socially and spatially but also in time. The Dalit has been given no avenue for progress. He has been given no avenue to travel. No avenue to move socially. He is frozen in the Brahmanical discourse. He is then categorized as primitive as "before time". Annabhau by deploying Dalit characters into his novels is able to infuse them with narrative

dynamism. To begin to make the first steps of breaking bonds, of gaining (reclaiming) time, Annabhau recognizes that this move is essential. It is essential that a Dalit mythology be legitimized. That subaltern histories be written, that heroes and goals emerge from the past to dynamise the present. That the Dalit be given the tools with which to access modernity. All these imperatives are lost in the subsuming Marxist economic discourse.

Since the life and literary works of Annabhau Sathe are so complexly interwoven, it is only natural that the conflict that he exposes in his writing surrounding the inapplicability of Marxist understandings and concepts to a caste-ridden society also comes out in his life. Annabhau was brutally reminded of how superficial the Universalist discourse of the Indian Marxist movement was time and again. The fact that he was left to rot after having his productive capabilities exploited by the Marxist movement would not be incriminating, except for the parallel trajectories of his high-caste “comrades”.

Further, an incident involving his daughter also brings this conflict into the domain of the “real”: Dalit Social activist Dadashaeb Khirsager<sup>24</sup> narrates the following story: Racked by poverty, Annabhau is urged by his comrades to send his daughter to dance as part of the *jalse* shows that frequently occurred. Annabhau by caste belonged to a community that sang and danced. Annabhau refuses, and asks his high-caste comrades to send their daughters to dance. The shocked intensity with which they refuse only serves to imprint the superficiality of the universalistic egalitarian claims of the Indian Marxist movement on Annabhau.

The ignominy that befell him in the hands of a mainstream Dalit community in Maharashtra is also a reflection of the need Annabhau felt to deconstruct caste identities as well as to evoke them. His community did not possess the literary traditions or capacity to critically engage his work and deploy it into wider circulation. The mainstream Dalit community marginalised his work and did not allow for its emergence in its own right.

Despite his prolific writing Annabhau is still relatively unknown outside Maharashtra. In one sense, he is definitely a cultural icon, his statues adorn various pedestals, his films draw huge crowds and people name their children after the heroes of his novels. However, one of the main reasons why Annabhau has remained in the margins of literature has been because his work has not been interpreted as canonical. As has been mentioned above, both the Marxists’ antipathy and the inter-caste politics that dominated Maharashtra denied Annabhau a lobby who would canonize his work. There was no Bengali renaissance, no Hindi promotion movement that would legitimize his position as a mainstream author. It is

<sup>24</sup> Dadasheb Khirsager, personal interview, 20 June 2004

only today, as the Dalit literary movement is finding its feet and creating its own idiom, that the time is ripe to reclaim for Annabhau this position.

And thus I conclude this attempt at understanding Annabhau Sathe, having grown much in the process and hopefully having helped extrapolate him from the confines of Marxist discourses and inter-caste politics and enabled a reading that both historicised and engages with Annabhau as a contemporary activist.

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