FORMS OF OPPRESSION: CASTE, CLASS AND ETHNICITY
A STUDY OF THREE TEXTS

Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of

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C E R T I F I C A T E

CENTRE OF LINGUISTICS AND ENGLISH
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Certified that the dissertation entitled FORMS OF OPPRESSION: CASTE, CLASS AND ETHNICITY, A STUDY OF THREE TEXTS, submitted by Raj Kumar Harijan is in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of Master of Philosophy of this University. This dissertation has not been submitted for any other degree to this University or to any other University and is his own work.

We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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RAJ KUMAR

C O N T E N T S

INTRODUCTION: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Although Indian society has for centuries been the most hierarchical among the known civilizations with a clear gradation in the exercise of power and privilege, the literatures of this country, until very recently, have never focussed on this problem of inequality. The pen has by and large been in the hands of those who weilded power, and those outside the grid of authority and agency have generally been rendered invisible in the canonised literary texts of India. It is only towards the end of the nineteenth century that a few unusual novels take up the theme of social oppression as their major concern, and in the twentieth century there is a gradually growing awareness in literature of those who have so far remained outside the threshold of mainstream Indian society: the outcastes, the landless, the dispossessed and the tribals.

My attempt in this dissertation will be to study the literary representation of different kinds of oppression through close study of three selected texts: Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable (English: 1935), Premchand's Godan (Hindi:1936) and Gopinath Monanty's Paraja (Oriya:

1945). These three novels, written within a decade of each other, concern themselves with oppression based on caste, class and ethnicity respectively. Normally in a study of this kind the texts for analysis are generally chosen from the same language. I am departing from this practice partly because Indian novels in English do not, for various reasons, offer us enough range of choice, and partly because, these novels written in different languages might illustrate the various ways a similar theme has been treated from region to region.

While dealing with the three novels mentioned above I will incidentally bring in some other texts exploring similar themes, eg. K. Sivarama Karanth's Chomanadudi (Kannada: 1933), Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's Scavenger's Son (Malayalam: 1948), Gopinath Mohanty's Harijan (Oriya: 1948), Mahasweta Devi's stories about tribal life including Draupadi (originally written in Bengali in the Seventies) and Bhagabati Panigrahi's well known Oriya short story Shikara (1936). Since my language competence is limited by the fact that I can read only two Indian languages: Oriya and Hindi, I will use the English translations of most of these texts. The limitations of translation, as we all know, are many, and have to be acknowledged. But my objective in this dissertation is to look at the representation of

oppression - hence the focus will be thematic rather than stylistic, and I would prefer not to take up issues regarding the quality or adequacy of translation in this limited space.

One of the greatest dividing forces that have separated human beings in India is the caste system or varnasharma dharma. In the next few pages I would like to give a brief overview of the Hindu caste structure. India has been reckoned as the most stratified of all known societies in human history. The caste system with its myriad variations of superordination and subordination, its many customs and taboos, exists in all the regions of India, albeit with different degrees of rigidity.

Hierarchy is inherent in our social structure right from the vedic times. In the Rig Veda, along with the distinction between Arya and Dasa, there is a division of society into three orders, viz. Brahmana, Kshatriya and Vaishya. The first two represented broadly the two professions of the poet-priest and the warrior chief. The third division was apparently a group comprising all the common people.[1] The fourfold division, the chaturvarna is rendered in a metaphoric way in the Purusha Sukta (Creation Hymn) in the Tenth

Mandala of the Rig Veda which says that the creator produced one community from the mouth, another from the shoulders, the third from the thighs and the last from the feet.[2] Naarayana, the famous Rishi, who sanctified Badri for all times by his stay there, is supposed to be the author of the Purusha Sukta, the first Indian attempt at cosmogenic hypothesis. The Sukta was allowed to remain and become responsible for the seeds of diffentiation and discrimination which were truly and deeply sown into the community with the sanctity a religion could grant. This is borne out by the Aitareya Brahmana, which describes a Brahmin as `a receiver of gifts, a drinker of soma, a seeker of food and liable to removal at will', a Vaishya as `tributary to another to be lived on by another and to be oppressed at will' and a Sudra as`a servant of another to be expelled at will and to be slain at will'.[3] The Kshatriya is left out of this inventory of functions as he is the king and has command over all in his domain.

In the varna scheme of the Vedas there are only four orders and there is no mention of the Untouchable group. But there are references in Vedic literature to groups such as the Ayogava, Chandala, Nishada and Paulkasa, who are outside the varna scheme, and who seem to be despised[4]. Over the centuries, the hierarchy continued so that at the bottom of the caste gradation

such marginal groups became identified as "ashprushya" (untouchable) with the lowest ritual standing. Usually they also had the lowest economic position and were traditionally subjected to onerous social and civil disabilities. Despite the legal abolition of untouchability in independent India (the Untouchability Offences Act was passed in 1955) and official reservation of jobs and of seats in legislatures, etc. even to this day the effects of the discrimination continue, upper caste people monopolising all the power and the lower communities continuing to be subordinated. The untouchables constituting the lowest stratum naturally find themselves in the most disadvantageous situation.

Some of the reasons for this can be traced back to the ancient times, when learning and using the Sanskrit language were the privileges of the upper caste. The untouchables, as well as women, were barred access to this language and this restriction was apparently codified in the Vedas, Smritis and Puranas. Thus, the Sanskrit language, which was the repository of knowledge and wisdom became a closely guarded terrain, where no outsiders were permitted. Knowledge and power are closely linked, according to Foucault. For him, knowledge of all sorts is thoroughly enmeshed in the complex activity of domination:

> "What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it does not only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces dicourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as negative instance whose function is repression".[5]

This is what precisely happened in the history of Hindu society. The hegemony of the high castes became so pervasive because all knowledge was generated and processed by them. People who enjoyed the fruits of knowledge and power did not let it go out of their hands. Some of the immediate effects of this policy were the non-proliferation of the Sanskrit language and the creation of an outer group, the Shudras, whose sole purpose of existence was to serve the interest of the upper caste people. As a result, for centuries a community remained permanently at the periphery of society even though they participated in its production process. Ironically people occupying the lowest strata of society were rendered untouchable, but not the goods they produced.

At different points of times in history, the institution of caste has been questioned by various reformers whose philosphy created the background for new religions. Jainism and Buddhism (both six century B.C.) set up for themselves the task of questioning the Brahminic orthodoxy. The religious scriptures were scrutinised to interrogate their truth. It is a paradox of history that inspite of the rise of such radical philosophies, the caste system has continued to be effective through the centuries, and remains operative even today.

In the medieval ages the Bhakti movement (roughly 8th to 18th century A.D.) which threw up radical thinkers and mystic reformers, was yet another force that challenged the varna system and stratification of human society. It cut across barriers of caste, creed, language and religion. Most of the poets, singers and saints in the Bhakti cult came from lower castes: Namadeva (1270-1350 A.D.) belonged to Chipis (cloth painter) caste; Kabir (1398-1518 A.D.) was a weaver; Raidas (contemporary of Kabir) was a cobbler ; Sena (contemporary of Raidas) a barber ; Tukaram (b. 1608 A.D.) was a farmer's son. The languages they used for their songs and dohas were the local languages spoken by the common people and very often they used metaphors connected with their work.

Kabir's strong note of dissent and protest against the existing reality, the glaring disparity between the rich and the poor, the discrimination by brahmans and high caste Hindus towards the low castes, especially the untouchables, and his emphasis on a direct relationship with God without the mediation of the brahmans and the mullahs, i.e. the clerics whom he ridicules as greedy and ignorant, had a profound impact. Surdas (A.D. 1483-1563) graphically described the hard life of the peasants and the oppressions of the local officials, landholders, and even high officials, such as the wazir.[6] Many historians and literary critics have seen bhakti poetry as an incipient movement for social protest, while others deny such an interpretation. M.S. Pati writes:

> "The saint might refer to the absurdities and cruelties of the social system, might react against intolerance and injustice, but his concern is not social or moral in the ordinary sense of the terms. And he is not a champion of any particular class or group. His solicitation and grace are all-embracing. He castigates and weeps for those who are spiritually blind and foolish. Discussions on social reference in Bhakti poetry would have, therefore, a dubious validity unless they are properly related to Bhakti".[7]

This is only one point of view, and it highlights only the religious aspect of bhakti. There are others who foreground the cultural dimension of this movement, looking upon it as a Renaissance of Medieval India. In his book Suradas: A Revaluation (1979) Girija Kumar Mathur writes:

> "Historians, commentators and literary critics have often emphasised the religious aspect of this movement more than its deeper cultural character. They have generally confined their interpretation to an analysis of the theories, philosophies and distinctive features of the various cults, their practices, rituals, their reformist and idealistic traits and the message of religious unity and tolearnce. Obviously, these commentators have generally felt shy of relating this great upsurge to the social and political conditions of the times. It was actually a people's movement carrying millions with it. For three hundred years it was a force to reckon with, a people's cultural force contrasted with the political might of the feudal dynastic rule".[8]

The Bhakti movement though started as a radical movement of dissent gradually became appropriated by the

dominant discourse. In course of time, the Bhakti ethos became a supplement to Brahminism.

During the Muslim rule in India a big chunk of Hindus, mostly from the untouchables and backward classes became Muslims. The Moplas of Malabar and the Chitagonians of East Pakistan are examples of en-masse conversions into Islam.[9] The process of proselytisation was, however, never on an organised scale. Only some of the so-called lower ranks, mainly comprising the artisans and wage earners, the real producers of wealth, willingly embraced Islam, attracted by its democratic structure and fraternal approach. It was true that compared to Hinduism, Islam granted relative equality to everyone irrespective of his status. More than anything else, it provided to every follower of the prophet opportunities to rise to any position according to his own capacity. In recent years, Hazari, an untouchable who converted into Islam, defends his stand in his autobiography Untouchable (1951) thus: "I began to ask, `why should I not become a Muslim and be a part of the great brotherhood of Islam, where there is no bar to color or caste? In this religion, there are no idols and only one God...".[10]

By the end of the eighteenth century the Bhakti movement was dying out and Indian society had become

rigid and stratified. It is at this juncture of time that India came directly in touch with the British. As rulers the British studied the nature of Indian society and life of its people.[11] Through exploration, excavacation, formulation, and tabulation, they tried to understand the past and present of India, its landscape, history and vegetation. This knowledge was an important element in understanding and controlling the country. Consequently a change seemed to have been initiated in the country where the old hierarchies would be challenged. The impact of British rule seen by Galanter was:

> "Conditions of peace, new communications, new economic activities, new kinds of employment, a new legal system, a new system of property relations, and new ideas brought in their train new opportunities and new modes of mobility. Old powers and prerogatives were abolished ; occupations and learning were rendered obsolete or marginal, new opportunities for gain and advancement were introduced, power and access to it were redistributed. Groups rose by association with the British Government, by trade with the British, by utilizing the new educational opportunities that the British introduced, by manipulation of the new legal facilities.

> Advantages gained in these ways tended to be cumulative, for utilization of these new opportunities was biased by the existing distribution of resources and by the network of kinship and community which offered access to them".[12]

In 1835 Macaulay's famous minute made English language the medium for higher education. His intention was to create an official class who could be the interpreters between the ruling British and the Indians. The Englishmen wanted this class to be, "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and intellect".[13] Thus a new hierarchy was established where competence in English would be the crucial factor for economic security and social status.

This new opportunity opened out by the colonial government was grasped largely by those who were already at the top of the traditional social structure. In other words, people who had earlier studied Sanskrit now began to avail themselves of the benefits of English education. Thus caste Hindus who had easy access to higher education in the new dispensation also obtained higher jobs in the British administration.[14]

India had undergone a series of changes in public administration and law in the eighteenth century. The Permanent Settlement was introduced in Bengal and Bihar in 1773 by Lord Cornwallis. By this act, the zamindars and revenue collectors were converted into so many landlords. They were not only to act as agents of the Government for collecting land revenue from the ryot but also to become the owners of all the land in their zamindaries. Their right of ownership was made hereditary and transferable. On the other hand the cultivators were reduced to the low status of mere tenants and were deprived of long-standing rights to the soil and other customary rights. In fact, the tenantry of Bengal and Bihar was left entirely at the mercy of the zamindars. Lal Behari Day's English novel Govinda Samanta (1874) narrates the sad stories of Bengal tenants.

The Ryotwari Settlement was introduced in the beginning of the nineteenth century in parts of the Madras and Bombay Presidencies. Under the system, the cultivator was to be recognised as the owner of his plot of land subject to the payment of land revenue. But the peasant soon discovered that the large number of zamindars had been replaced by one giant zamindar - the state - and that they were mere government tenants whose land was sold if they failed to punctually pay land

land was sold if they failed to punctually pay land revenue.

Another system was the Mahalwari System, a modified version of the zamindari settlement, introduced in the Ganga valley, the North-West provinces, parts of Central India, and the Punjab. According to this system, the revenue settlement was to be made village by village or estate (mahal) by estate with landlords or heads of families who collectively claimed to be the landlords of the village or the estate.

Thus, these systems departed fundamentally from the traditional land systems of the country where the zamindars were the intermediaries who collected land revenue from the cultivators and kept a part of it as their commission. All over the country land was now made saleable, mortgageable, and alienable. Now the cultivator could borrow money on the security of this land or even sell part of it and pay his land revenue. The zamindars continued to play their old games but now they exploited the poor people in collaboration with corrupt policemen and unscrupulous lawyers. This situation gave rise to a new class of landlords who were also moneylenders, a whole power flowed from moneylending. This new alliance is explored in Fakirmohan Senapati's Oriya novel Chhamana Athaguntha (1898).

Changes in the structure of society give us new art forms. Novel as a genre came to exist in India with the rise of the urban middle class during the British rule and the spread of English education. In the middle of the nineteenth century the educated Indians in their exposure to English literature became familiar with a new literary genre - the novel. In Victorian England this genre by and large used realism as a mode and was well suited to the representation of social relity. Before this, the aristocratic and feudal soceities had their own special art forms - Romance and Pastoral - which collapsed with changes in British social and economic structure. In England the novel in its present sense of the term emerged in the eighteenth century, and by the time the first three universities were set up in India in 1858 the English novel in Britain was more than a century old. The first generation of English educated graduates found this new narrative very attractive, and many of them attempted to recreate this form in their own languages. The first Bengali, Marathi novels began to appear in the sixties of the ninteenth century. By the end of the nineteenth century a few novels in different languages had also started reflecting the ground realities of land holding in rural areas and the expolitation of peasant. Lal Behari Day's Govinda

Samantha (English: 1874) and Fakirmohan Senapati's Chhamana Athaguntha (Oriya: 1898) can be cited as examples.

Lal Behari Day's novel Govinda Samanta deals with the "social and domestic life of the rural population and working class of Bengal". Here, Day creates an unscrupulous character in Jayachand Raya Chaudhari, the zamindar who uses every cruel and dishonest method to swindle money from the raiyats. As a result, we see, how a peasant family withers under the wrath of the greedy zamindar. As we have mentioned earlier, the Permanent Settlement left the tenants totally at the mercy of the zamindar. Commenting on this new revenue system, Day writes in his book that there was "a perpetual struggle between the raiyat and the zamindar, the one insisting on the payment of the fixed rent, and the other endeavouring to enhance that rent under all sorts of pretexts".[15]

Orissa came to be ruled by the British in 1803, after which Orissa underwent a series of transitions by way of public administration and the system of law. In almost all his novels, Fakirmohan depicts the whole of Oriya society at a point of critical change. Chhamana Athaguntha, though published in 1898 dramatizes the major changes that overtook Oriya society during the early

decades of the nineteenth century.

In Chhamana Athaguntha, Ramachandra Mangaraj's attempt to occupy chhamana athaguntha (six point eight acres) of land from Bhagia provides the novel with its central action. And this very piece of land gives the novel its title. The novel tries to show the picture of an agrarian society under the control of an acquistive moneylender. Ramachandra Mangaraj typifies the newly emergent middle class in the village while Bhagia and Saria represent the victims. Mangaraj's villany and Bhagia's unmerited suffering may be seen as a paradigm of human oppression but in the novel they are products of a historical process in which a feudal society was painfully adapting itself to the needs of an alien system. In fact, Chhamana Athaguntha reveals an insight into the changing composition of the ruling class in the early decades of nineteenth century. In the novel, the zamindari of Govindpur belongs initially to a feudal family. Then it is taken over by an extravagant Musilm trader. After that it passes into the hands of Ramachandra Mangaraj, the central character ot the novel. At the end of the novel, the zamindari is transferred to a small town lawyer. This transfer of power from the village moneylender to the lawyer reflects the ascendancy of the urban professional middle class.

There is a general impression among the Indian writers, literary critics, historians and sociolgists that the policies of the British Government especially the land reforms were responsible for unsettling the stability and continuity of the Indian village life. They are critical of the way the new zamindari system resulted in the deteriotation of the economic condition of the ryots. But they forget the sufferings of the landless labourers of that time who were from the lower caste or untouchable community. Their condition was in no way changed by the change in government. As Andre Beteille points out:

> "The condition of Harijan (untouchables) labourers during the early years of British rule and before was not very much better than it is today. In term of this argument it is perhaps misleading to represent traditional Indian society as a peasant society. It was a society in which economic inequalities were moulded into a peculiarly hierarchical pattern by the institution of caste".[16]

Beteille argues that the tenants were not the worst sufferers: "To speak of the oppression suffered by

the tenants because of the conditions created by British rule is often to ignore the fact that most tenants enjoyed a very privileged position in relation to their labourers".[17]

It was the Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century who sought to transform the lives of a section of the marginalised people Beteille talks about in the above quotation. The missionaries were pragmatists: they gave the untouchables only such things which would immmediately get them social status and self-esteem. Dunkan B. Forrester (1980) quotes John Clough, an American Bapist missionary who says that "the search for material improvement or enhancement of status is seldom if ever the sole or even the dominant motive in a mass movement. Dignity, self-respect, patrons who will treat one as an equal, and the ability to choose one's own destiny - all these are powerful incentives to conversion".[18] Thus conceived, education and religion were two paths to a single goal. The missionaries built as many churches as they built schools in unheard of and remote tribal areas. Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and the whole of the North-East came most noticeably under the influence of the missionaries. As in Africa, the coastal regions in India also became their centres of activity. As a result, the coastal state Kerala, and the

coastal part of Karnataka and Tamilnadu saw immediate social, educational and economic changes. In this connection Forrester writes:

> "New educational opportunities gradually (be) came available to converts, and changes in life-style became accepted. Converts accepted to give up the eating carrion and drinking alcohol, were encouraged to show their greater cleanliness, and soon found it possible to enter a variety of occupations which had hither to been closed to them, such as school teaching, or work in one of the mission industries".[19]

Today, to an extent missionary activities have come to a standstill due to various reasons. The first and the foremost is the withdrawl of the encouragment by the government, which they enjoyed during the colonial rule and secondly, the new predominance of religion and caste in national and local politics. Evidences are there from tribal belts of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh that many churches have come under severe threat and attack from Hindu fundamentalist groups. Many converts have been re-converted into Hinduism under threat and compulsions.

Of course, conversion had become a political issue long before the recent outbreak of Hindutva. Improvement of the social and economic condition was of the large number of outcastes through conversion implicitly seen as a threat to the power of the dominant Hindu society. D.E. Smith (1963) analyses this attitude thus: "From the early 1930s the issue of conversion from among the depressed classes was increasingly treated as a political issue. Possibilities of advancement for the Harijans (untouchables) using strictly secular paths increased vastly in importance, and the various kinds of protective discrimination as they were, and are, available only to `Hindu-Harijans' in most instances".[20]

That is why, perhaps, the Indian novelists of 1930s like Sivarama Karanth and Mulk Raj Anand in their respective novels Chomanadudi and Untouchable while depicting the lives of their untouchable heroes reject Christianity as a viable alternative. Even 'Mahatma Gandhi who is believed to be the champion of the cause of untouchability was against conversion. Forrester quotes one of Gandhi's articles which was published in The Harijan, December 1936: "Gandhi's attitude was perhaps betrayed when he advised a missionary to pray for the harijan, but not to try to convert them because they did not have `the mind and intelligence to understand what you talked. .....

would you preach the Gospel to a cow"?[21]

All through the nineteenth century the building of roads and railways and introduction of post and telegraph, printing press, and industries helped India organise itself on new ways through improved communications. Besides this, the influence of western thought gave rise to different kinds of reform movements in India. Shankar Ghose in his book Western Impact on Indian Politics (1967) writes:

> "In social matters contact with Western thought helped to give rise to movement against the undemocratic institution of caste which in the past had been criticised by Indian religious reformers and religious leaders such as Buddha, Mahavira, Ramanuja, Ramananda, Kabir, Nanak and others".[22]

The first important reform movement of Hinduism, the Brahmo Samaj (1829) attacked some of the evils of the caste system but it concentrated more on the issues pertaining to the upper caste,eg. Sati, child marriage, widow remarriage, etc. Those who felt attracted towards the new faith were basically the educated and westernised class. Later in the century in the northern part of the country the Arya Samaj (1875) gave a call: "Go back to

Veda" which meant going to the past for a religious revival in order to gain self-respect. This was a movement to counter the influence of Christianity and western values. In the opinion of M.S.A. Rao (1984), Arya Samaj introduced proselytization into Hinduism.[23]

In Maharastra the Satyasodhak Samaj (1873) was somewhat different from the other reform movements mentioned above. Its founder was Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890) who himself hailed from a lower caste community and he protested against the caste system through his writings. He attempted a demythification of the Hindu concepts: For him, Brahma was not the creator of the world but a stereotypical Brahmin, an avaricious, cunning and secretive clerk [24]; and the Vedic texts were false fables.[25] He variously tried to understand and explain the origin of caste system. According to him, "The prohibition, in the writing of Manu, of the education of Shudras arose out of the fear lest the Shudras should remember their former greatness, their authority".[26]

Phule criticised the Brahmin community for their evil practices of child marriage, shaving of the heads of widows and encouraged widow remarriages. Apart from this, he was the first to set up a school for lower caste boys and girls in the year 1852 in Poona.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many prominent writers sporadically took up the cause of the untoucables through their writing. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, a very important Bengali writer wrote that, "For the oppressed, oppression by high caste countrymen was not less than galling than oppression by arrogant foreigners".[27] Yet in Bankim's fourteen novels there is not one that deals with the theme of caste oppression, nor are there any characters in his fiction who come from outside the caste Hindu society. .

Rabindranath Tagore in his essay on Nationalism condemns the unjust order of Indian society and seeks justice for the lower caste. He writes:

> "It was out of the narrowness of sympathy that Indians had denied the inferior castes, their social rights, and as long as Indian society remained unjust, there could be no justice in politics".[28]

At least in one famous poem he lashes out at the humiliation meted out to human being in our country predicting that this asymmetry will one day drag down the privileged to the same level of degradation:

> "O my unfortunate country, those whom you have insulted.
> You will have to come down their level through insults"..[29]

Also one of his plays Chandalika deals with the subjectivity of an untouchable girl. In his discursive prose he often comes back to this problem. Some of his short stories and novels (eg. Gora: 1909) deal marginally with his concern about caste injustice, but we do not find a single major character in any of his novels belonging to a low caste of untouchable status. This makes Mulk Raj Anand say in 1930s that, "Most Indian writers of the modern period, like Bankim Chatterjee, Ratannath Sarshar and Rabindranath Tagore, had not accepted in their novels that even the so-called lowest dregs of humanity, living in utmost poverty, squalor and degradation, could become heroes of fiction".[30]

In the twentieth century the emergence of Gandhi and Ambedkar on the Indian political scene brings about a perceptible change in the Hindu society. Both of them, each in his own way, attacked the hierarchy of Hinduism. Gandhi (1869-1948) believed that untouchability was an excrescene, a pathological growth that had nothing to do with the essential nature of caste which was a framework for the division of labour. He maintained that caste had existed in the past without untouchability and untouchability could be purged from it without doing any damage to its fundamental design. Gandhi advocated a

purified varnashrama dharma in which untouchables would be restored to their rightful place as Shudras.

Ambedkar (1891-1956) took a diametrically opposite position to that of Gandhi. In Ambedkar's views, the root of untouchability lay in the varna system. For Hindus to accomodate the untouchables, the basic chaturvarna order must itself be purged. Ambedkar was so disgusted with the caste system of Hinduism that he burnt the Manusmriti in 1927 which perpetuated the social, economic, religious and political slavery of the untouchables and he became a Budhist just before his death. Perhaps, he was right in his conclusion that so long as there is a caste hierarchy in Hindu society untouchability would continue to exist.

During the freedom struggle many literary organisations came up in different parts of the country. Their objectives were: to carry on the freedom struggle through their literature ; to dedicate their lives to the cause of the nation's freedom ; to reform the evils of society and bring into being an egalitarian order. The Navayuga Sahitya Sansada (1935) was such an organisation, came into existence in Orissa. The Sansad passed certain resolutions promising the eradication of poverty and caste for the integration of the country. A poem of Ananta Patnaik was read out to generate a new

awareness among the youth:

> "O youngmen of the new-age
> Wake up.
> Break up the chains of many hands
> Wipe out their cries
> Finish up the notions of castes, sub-castes
> And sub-nations".[31]

However, the Sansad could not last long. Natabara Samantaray, an Oriya critic, observes that the failure of the Sansad was due to its overt political motivation and inability to rise above propaganda literature.[32] There were several such mobilisation of writers in different languages but none of these lasted long, except an all India organisation that came to be known as the Progressive Writers Movement or Pragativadi Andolan.

In 1936, the first meeting of the All India Progessive Writers Conference (AIPWC) brought together writers from many languages. Premchand (1880-1936) presided over this meeting and read a paper titled 'Sahityaka Uddheshya' (The Purpose of Literature). There he traced a new kind of writing that would help the Indian society to fight against all kinds of inequalities and establish a new social order. He felt:

> "The search for a new beauty in life will impel writers to uproot a social system where

> one individual can tyranise over thousands of men, human self-respect will ask us to raise a banner of revolt against capitalism, militarism and imperialism. Further, we should not be content only by expressing on paper our disapproval of all this. We should be actively working for this establishment of a social order which does not negate beauty and good taste and human dignity".[33]

The writers who met at this conference pledged to highlight in their writing the condition of the poor and the oppressed, and work for the eradication of inequality in society. There is no doubt that their writings show their involvement with the underpriviledged and the dispossessed. The concerns of Mulk Raj Anand and Premchand who were both present at the conference can be seen in their respective novels Untouchable and Godan which will be discussed in the subsequent chapters separately.

Mulk Raj Anand talks about caste oppression whereas Premchand emphasises class inequality. There is another writer of this century, Gopinath Mohanty (1914-1991) whose primary concern is with the exploitation of the tribal people. In his novel Paraja (Oriya: 1945) he dramatizes the process by which the tribals are being

destroyed. The novel discusses a particular tribal community who are at first untouched by the complexities of urban life. In the course of the action of the novel they get entangled by the market value system, by bureaucracy and by a legal system that is beyond their comprehension. This novel will be taken up for detailed discussion in chapter IV.

Writers like Anand, Premchand and Mohanty wrote about the oppressed and the exploited with empathy and understanding, but because they themselves by virtue of their birth and education stood outside this arena of suffering, their representation of the poor and the downtrodden were bound to be different from the self-representation of these people. For a long time the low caste, the underclass and the tribal did not receive an education which would enable them to write fiction. But from the early 1970s a new kind of literature emerged in Maharashtra written by the lowest caste which was collectively given the name "Dalit Literature". "Dalit" is an old Marathi word found in Molesworth's Marathi-English Diotionary (1813) meaning (1) Ground; (2) Broken or reduced to pieces generally.[34] It is also a Sanskrit word (meaning 'crushed') and is understood in all the Indian languages that are derived from Sanskrit. Although the movement began in Maharastra, in subsequent years it

has spread to the neighbouring states of Gujarat and Karnataka also.

"In the new cultural context", writes Elenor Zelliot in her book From Untouchable to Dalit (1992), "none of the normal words - Untouchables, Scheduled Castes, Depressed Classes, Gandhi's euphemism, Harijan - had the same connotation. Dalit implies those who have been broken, ground down by those above them in a deliberate and active way. There is in the word itself an inherent denial of pollution, karma, and justified caste hierarchy".[35]

In his essay titled Dalit Literature: Past, Present and Future (1992) Arjun Dangle describes what is Dalit Literature and who are the Dalits:

> "Dalit literature is one which acquaints people with caste system of exploitation. In other words, Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experience, joys and sorrows and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society. It matures with a sociological point of view and related to the principles of negativity, rebellion

and loyalty to science, thus finally ending a revolutionary".[36]

Dalit literature has arisen from cultural conflict.[37] Since the `downtrodden´ has no place or hardly any in the established canonical literature of India, Dalit writers call it "Hindu literature" and challenge its hegemony. In the words of Baburao Bagal:

> "The established literature of India is Hindu literature. But it is Dalit literature which has the revolutionary power to accept new science and technology and bring about a total transformation. `Dalit´ is the name of total revolution, it is revolution incarnate".[38]

Thus, Dalit literature is closely associated with the hopes for freedom of a group of people who, as untouchables, have for a long time been victims of social, economic and cultural inequality. The Dalit writers attempt to be true to their lived experience and feel that their visions and responses must be translated into art honestly, in its raw undistilled form, without euphemism. The language they use is often brutal and crude, the language of the slum, springing from a life of poverty, ignorance and violence. There is even an

attempt on their part to evolve a new aesthetics because they feel that the genteel expectations of the existing elite literary standards cannot do justice to the quality of the life they know and render in writing. In this dissertation I am not taking up any dalit text mainly because, although short pieces and poems are available in translation, no novel-length narrativs has been translated as yet.

Notes and References

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22. Shankar Ghose, The Western Impact on Indian Politics, Allied Publishers, New Delhi (1967) p. 210.

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25. On the Vedas Phule writes, "Brahma first invented the practice of scratching on palm leaves with a sharp point, and collected together some magical incantations and false fables..... issued forth out of the mouth of Brahma". Jyityba Phule, Slavery (p. 112),

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34. Eleanor Zelliot, From Untouchable to Dalit, Manohar, New Delhi (1992) p. 267.

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CHAPTER I

UNTOUCHABLE

= I =

The so called Indian Renaissance in the nineteenth century was characterised by a reform movement that attempted to rid society of its old orthodoxies regarding caste, class and gender. Women's education, widow re-marriage, equality before God were some of the issues taken up by the leaders in different parts of the country. Yet strangely enough in the creative literature of that period the low caste people and the outcastes are virtually invisible. Since education was not available to them, they formed no part of the readership, and since caste Hindu life had been organised to keep them at the peripheries, they did not figure in the Indian language novels about social and domestic life that began to be written in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

The situation was not very different in the early decades of the twentieth century. Except for a Telugu novel Mala Palli (1921) by Unnava Lakshminarayana which is said to deal with the untouchables (the novel is as yet not available in English translation) no

novelist in India seems to have focussed on the large section of the dispossessed and exploited people. Though Sivarama Karanth's Chomanadudi (Kannada: 1933) is another attempt to depict the life of an untouchable family [its English translation was not available till 1978]. From that point of view Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable (1935) seems to be a pioneering attempt to give visiblity to the silent and shadowy community who maintain cleanliness and health of the upper caste people. After him Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai in Scavenger's Son (Malayalam: 1948) and Gopinath Mohanty in Harijan (Oriya: 1948) have written about the untouchables. In recent years, however, we have a new perspective on the lives of the lower castes in the literature written by these exploited people themeselves.

The ancient dharma sastras (religious texts) of the Hindus not only defended the institution of Varnashrama, but also imposed a series of of social, political economic and religious restrictions in the lower castes making the untouchables completely dependent on those above them. They were relegated only to menial occupations. They lived outside the village and fed on the left overs of the high caste people. Physical contact with untouchables was said to be "polluting" and worse still, even their shadows were considered defiling.

Even as late as in the early part of our century, the untouchables had no access to public facilities, such as, wells, rivers, schools, roads, markets, post offices and courts. Even for a basic necessity like water they were helplessly dependent on the good will of the higher castes. They were denied entry into temples and rest houses and shrines connected to temples were also beyond their reach. Comforts such as riding on horseback, use of bicycles, the use of palanquins and goods connected with luxury such as umbrellas, foot wear, gold and silver ornaments, etc. were forbidden for them. [1] The most perverted practice of untouchability was that which at one time compelled the untouchables to tie an earthen pot around their neck so that their sputum should not fall to the earth and pollute it. Another was the compulsion to tie a broom behind them so that their foot prints would be erased before others set their eyes on them.[2]

Thus, the untouchables lived a life full of physical degradation, insults and mental humiliation. The few writers who attempted to portray their lives tended to be driven either by their zeal for social reform or by sentimental compassion. Rarely did a writer take up an untouchable character and treated him realistically like an ordinary human being full of vitality, hope as well as despair and perplexity. Mulk Raj Anand is important

because he attempted precisely this.

= II =

That this attempt should be made by an Indian who writes in English is also a fact worth noticing. It may well be that this new branch of the Indian novel, not being burdened with an existing tradition, could strike out in new directions, and deal with themes customarily not considered 'literary'. It is also possible that English not being the language of daily use at that level of society, helped to distance the writer from his material, and in any case the word 'untouchable' was much more sanitised and free of stigma than any of its Indian language equivalents.

The Indian novel in English is a relatively new phenomenon which gathered momentum only in the twentieth century. The three major writers who emerged in the thirties are Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan. India, as Nehru has observed in The Discovery of India (1946) does not have a monolithic culture. The writings of these three writers give us glimpses of three different orders of social reality. Raja Rao began his writings with the exploration of the freedom struggle and the influence of Gandhi in a village of Karnataka in Kanthapura (1938). Some of the characters in this novel

are untouchables who join the Gandhian movement, but they are seen from the perspective of a sympathetic Brahmin widow, who is the narrator.

All the later works of Raja Rao highlight the Sanskrit and Brahmanic heritage of the past and the present. Mulk Raj Anand writes about just the other face of the same world - he focuses on the wrongs that were perpetrated by the so called great tradition. R.K. Narayan stays somewhere in between, concentrating on the middle class and their ordinary preoccupations in a place that is neither rural nor metropolitan.

Mulk Raj Anand is a prolific writer and has written a large number of novels and short stories. Other than imaginative fiction, his books cover a whole range of subjects - from Indian curries to Hindu view of art. This breadth of interest makes him unusual among Indian novelists.

Right from the beginning of his writing career, Anand is known for his concern with social injustice. He deals with the working classes and underdogs of the society and often he gives them a central place in his creative work. In this connection Srinivasa Iyenger writes of Anand, "In writing of the pariahs and the bottom dogs rather than of the elect and the

sophisticated, he had ventured into territory that had been largely ignored till then by Indian writers".[3] Elena J. Kallinnikove writes that, "Anand believes neither in Shiva, nor in Jesus Christ, but in ordinary man. It is precisely a simple toiler whom Anand praises in his works". [4] The very titles of his works testify to this fact: Untouchable, Coolie, The Village, The Barber's Trade Union, etc.

In his first novel Untouchable (1935), Anand deals with exploitation based on caste. He shows here an untouchable family that has been inhumanly deprived of all the basic social necessities of man. While the novel examines the nature of the degradation imposed on the lower castes by the caste Hindus, it also expresses the upper caste's hypocrisy and double standards. The novel will be discussed in detail later.

In his next novel Coolie (1936), Anand analyses the problem of oppression in terms of class. The protagonist, Munno, though he belongs to a higher caste, undergoes a lot of suffering due to poverty. In the novel Munno declares, "Castes did not matter. I am a Kshatriya and I am poor, and Verma, a Brahmin, is servant boy, a menial , because he is poor. No ! caste does not matter..... There must only be two kinds of people in the world: the rich and the poor".[5]

The next novel Two Leaves and a Bud (1937) deals with the miseries of the migrant labourers in a Tea Estate, who are displaced, exploited and victimised. This was a subsidiary thread in Raja Rao's Kanthapura also, where the Skeffington Coffee Estate served as the opposite of the agrarian village Kanthapura, one a conglomeration of rootless workers, and the other an organic community, hierarchical but human. In Anand's novel Gangu, a worker of the tea garden is shot dead while rescuing his daughter from the assault of the supervisor of the plantation.

Thereafter Anand wrote a triology - The Village (1939), Across the Black Waters (1940) and The Sword and the Sickles (1942). All three novels trace the growth and experience of a Sikh peasant boy, Lalu Singh. Lalu is a child in the first book and grows to be a young man in the second. In the third novel, he graduates into manhood and travels outside the country as a soldier. On his return he becomes politically conscious and fights against the injustice done to the entire peasant community. In these three novels Anand shows the longing of an individual for a free world.

Anand's next novel, The Big Heart (1945) portrays the marginalisation of the village artisan

with the onset of industrialization. The setting up of factory poses a big threat to the lives of the coppersmiths. In the ensuing battle between the industrialists and Ananta, the rebel leader championing the cause of coppersmiths, Ananta meets with death at the end of the novel.

Anand returns to the problem of untouchability twenty five years later in his novel The Road (1961). The recurrence of the theme in Anand's works points to its perennial significance especially because it involves a large section of Indian populace to whose condition India's attainment of independence has made little difference. Though Bhikhu, the protagonist of The Road, is a road-worker and not a sweeper as Bakha is in Untouchable, his condition is no different from Bakha's which the novel The Road purports to emphasise. What is significant in the novel is that it views Bhikhu's situation as expressive of the chronic malaise with which Indian society is stricken-a malaise which makes it difficult for him to survive with dignity and with unimpaired self-esteem. Bhikhu has to contend with the ideology of a power structure which tends to perpetuate itself through the maintenance of the status quo. That is the reason why despite his resentment and attempt to seek expression for his rebellious spirit he finds himself

fighting a losing battle. The road becomes the central issue with which the protagonist has to contend.

Thus, in Anand's tension ridden world we always see a struggle for social justice going on although the attempts at resistance are not always successful. We also see the traditional Hindu society being posited as the enemy of the lower castes. In Anand's rural novels the villains are several: the high caste Brahmin or the priest, the landlord and the moneylender, all of whom squeeze the poor peasant or worker to the utmost. Even if Anand cannot show the underdog winning his battle - it would indeed be unrealistic to portray such as victory - by giving us his perspective of the struggle, he imbues these mute victim figures with dignity. In this venture, Mulk Raj Anand has more in common with the first generation of African writers in English like Chinua Achebe who wrote to restore the dignity of his people, reminding them that their past was not one long period of darkness - critically exploring the strengths and weakness of his culture. Writing with the same purpose, Anand as a critical insider examines the darker aspects of his own society. He does not offer a cure for the disease, he merely diagnoses, hoping to raise consciousness about a situation most people in India tend to take for granted. Chekov once wrote in a letter

"between the solution of the question and the correct setting of a question, the latter alone is obligatory for the artist".[6] It is with this view that we have to look at Anand's Untouchable.

= III =

Anand in his "Afterword" tells us how his novel Untouchable came to be written and how it acquired its present shape. "I could not have started off writing my first book, Untouchable, if I had not noticed your own sympathy for the out castes of India in your famous book", writes Anand in a tribute to his revered friend Foster. And we know from Forster's "preface" to Untouchable that this "famous book" is certainly no other than The Passage to India. Anand does not elaborate on this further, but as readers of A Passage to India we feel that Anand may be thinking of the centrality given to the pankhawala in A Passage to India:

> "Almost naked, and splendidly formed.....he had strength and beauty that sometimes come to flower in Indians of low birth. When that strange race rears the dust and is condemned as untouchable, then nature remembers the physical perfection that she accomplished elsewhere, and throws out a god - not many, but one here and there, to prove to society

how little its categories impressed her". [7]

Anand learnt from James Joyce"the stream of consciousness" and the literary techniques, as he himself confesses. Further, the plays of the Irish writers which dealt with peasants, fishermen and slum dwellers also helped Anand. Another great influence on Anand was Mahatma Gandhi whose" editing (and) censoring" gave the novel its final shape. In recognition of this, in later editions Anand dedicates the novel to Gandhi also.

Anand had read the story of the sweeper boy Ukha, written by Gandhi in Young India. Anand's hero Bakha, his father Lakha, and his brother Rakha seem to derive their names from the historical Ukha, an untouchable boy serving in the household of Gandhi.[8] This is perhaps, the reason why Anand wanted to show the manuscript of the Untouchable to Gandhi, but when he came back from England, a different experience awaited him at Gandhi's ashram. Gandhi would not entertain Anand in his ashram until the latter took three vows: not to look at women with desire, not to drink alcohol in the ashram and to clean latrines once a week. Within three months of staying there and practising the vows he had taken, Anand developed a new approach to life. He writes, "I found

myself being converted to some sincerity, simplicity and truth and to the love of people". Gandhi suggested that from his manuscript Anand should cut the high sounding passages, the comic and tragic motifs, a delibertate attempt by which the novelist had made a few scenes melodramatic. Thus, the two hundred and fifty pages of the original manuscript was reduced to just a hundred and fifty, the present novel.

= IV =

The novel Untouchable opens with the description of the outcaste colony which is located at the fringes of the town Bulandshahar and at a considerable distance from the caste Hindu settlements. This reminds us of the description of the similar situation in Sivarama Karanth's Kannada novel Chomanadudi (translated into English as Choma's Drum by U.K. Kalkur in 1978) where Choma's hut stands in solitary seclusion at the edge of the forest, because he is a holeya, an untouchable by birth. The untouchables' quarters are situated outside the village all over India even now because they are considered "polluting." The untouchables live in huts made of mud walls just like the "slumblings and rickety hovels" of the coppersmiths in another novel by Anand The Big Heart. The surroundings of the outcaste

colony are filthy because the civic amenities are not extended to the untouchables. Anand describes. "There are no drains, no lights, no waters of the marsh and where people live among the latrines of the townsmen, and in the stink of their own dung scattered about here, there and every where; of the world where the day is dark as the night and the night pitch - dark".[9] There live the scavengers, leather workers, washermen, barbers, water carrier, and grass - cutters - all are untouchables and they live in miserable and sub-human conditions.

Bakha, the hero of the Untouchable is born and brought up in these surroundings. Lakha, his father is the Jemadar of all the sweepers in the town and in the cantonment. By profession, they do all the cleaning work in the town and in the cantonment. Socially deprived as they are, they also remain economically poor. Their meagre earnings make them dependent on the upper caste people for their basic need such as food, clothes etc.

Anand gives Bakha, a young man of eighteen, a strong and supple body almost like Forster's pankhawala thereby making him mythical as well as real. Because the lower class people do hard physical labour, their bodies are muscular when young, and bony when old. Anand chooses as his hero an adolescent - a boy at the threshold of manhood - so that he can depict both his childish

playfulness, as well as the stirrings of adult passion and questioning.

The novel covers one day - from morning till evening. In this period, Anand presents the various ugly manifestations of the caste system and exposes the hypocrisies of the orthodox Hindu society. By using this narrative device of collapsing many experience within a limited time span, Anand packs his novel with events and introspection. On this crucial day Bakha encounters different forms of discrimination and wakes up, as it were from an unthinking boyhood when he had taken all his suffering passively as his fate, to a self-reflexive state of manhood.

Everyday Bakha starts his duty much before the day begins. Sleepily and shivering in the cold he starts cleaning the latrines. Daily he has to clean three rows of latrines repeatedly. He is responsible for bringing cleanliness to a place that would otherwise remain filthy and possibly breed diseases. Bakha is an efficient worker who works quickly and earnestly. When he works, "Each muscle of his body, hard as a rock when it came into play, seemed to shine forth like glass, ... What a dexterous work man the onlooker would have said. And though his job was dirty he remained comparatively

clean",[10] Anand writes.

The physical description of Bakha is realistic no doubt, but not untinged by a slight romanticization. This heightening is deliberately done because Anand wants to positively focus on the human potential of the boy. The description reminds us of Okwonkwo in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1958). Anand is an Indian and Achebe a Nigerian, but both the novelists are writing about a people who were looked down upon and not considered as human beings by the ruling class and the novels want to emphasise and generate their own self-esteem. By remarking, 'what a dexterous workers the onlooker would have said'- Anand reminds us of the attractiveness of hard work and a well-made body. This sentence cannot be taken as a simple realistic statement. It has a lot of complex reasonances for a society divided on caste lines. Here the novelist is showing his upper caste readers that beauty is not dependent on its surroundings, that work itself is beautiful.

We also know through his hockey hero Havildar Charat Singh that Bakha plays hockey well. Bakha proves this later in the day when he scores a goal for his team against the 31st Punjabis. Anand uses the motif of game effectively to show a common denominator that unites persons of unequal age and different castes. Also we

already know of Bakha's excellent body. That he should be skilful in sports follows naturally.

Inspite of the talent Bakha has, he does not get a proper chance to develop his sportsmanship due to his poor socio-economic conditions. Bakha's servility when he salutes Charat Singh in the hope of getting a hockey stick is something the author wants us to be disturbed about. Instead of demanding from the world what is his due, Bakha seems to be overly grateful for small favors:

> " It is due to the trait of servility in Bakha which he had inherited from his forefathers: the weakness of the downtroden, the helpless of the poor and the indigent sullenly receiving help, the passive contentment of the bottom dog suddenly illuminated by the prospect of fulfillment of a secret and a long cherished desire".[11]

Anand's anger seems to come from the individualistic tradition of Western civilization, rather than from the hierarchical tradition of Hindu society to which he himself belongs. It is possible that his prolonged stay in England where the society is relatively more egalitarian made Anand more sensitive to these issues of inequality which most other Indians passively

accept.

Just as within any upper caste there are innumerable castes and subcastes, so the lower castes are also graded in many layers. Those who are slightly high in this hierarchy look down on the others who are supposed to be inferior to them. When Sohini, Bakha's sister, comes to the well, she is naturally snubbed by Gulabo, a washer woman. Even later we find among Bakha's playmates there is a subtle but sure distinction among the subdivisions of the untouchable community.

The apperance of the priest, Pandit Kali Nath on the scene brings hope for the untouchables who are waiting for a "kind hearted Hindu" to come to give them water from the well. It is to be remembered that untouchables are not permitted to draw the water from the caste Hindus' well for the fear of "pollution". Pandit Kali Nath draws water for physical exerise more than as an act of generosity. More despicable still his voyeuristic appreciation for Sohini:

> " - the fresh young from whose full breasts with their dark beads of nipples stood out conspicuously under her muslin shirt, whose innocent look of wonder seemed to stir the only soft chord in his person, hardened by the congenital weakness of his mind, brazened

by the authority he exercised over the faithful and the devout. And he was inclined to be kind to her".[12]

The physical description of Sohini parallels Bakha's in the sense that both are realistic as well as exotic. Although degraded socially, both of them are physically attractive. In Anand's portrayal of Sohini there is also a hidden agenda. Anand gives the readers an impression that Sohini is almost nude. He does this deliberately to draw our attention to a naked truth: the impoverishment of the untouchable. In other words, Sohini's poverty is her nakedness.

Pandit Kali Nath takes advantage of his caste and later in the day tries to molest Sohini in the temple yard. And when she screams, he comes out shouting that he has been defiled. This is not just a caricature of a lecherous Brahmin priest taking advantage of his status, it raises questions about the logic of "pollution" also. In this connection C.D. Narasimhaiah comments:

> "We are now shown brother and sister suffering ignominy and shame, with the lie not in their hearts but in those who pretended to keep the truth of God, His abode and themselves in pristine purity. The

untouchables, Anand's art has made us to see, are not Bakha and his sister, but those others who called them so".[13]

Sohini is not the only untouchable girl in literature to be shown as a victim of the lust of the higher castes. Similar examples could be cited from Sivarama Karanth's Chomanadudi, Gopinath Mohanty's Harijan, U.K. Anantha Murthy's Samskara (Kannada; 1965) and many others. In all the above mentioned novels the caste Hindu men either molested or raped the untouchable women expioiting their helpless socio-economic conditions. It is as if chastity is important only for the upper caste and upper class women. Sexual exploitation and economic exploitation are often carried on simultaneously.

Anand takes us to the market area of the town with Bakha just to show us another face of caste discrimination. Here the novelist draws our attention to Bakha's taste : he smokes "Red Lamp" cigarettes and loves to eat jalebis. Earlier we have been shown how he likes the clothes of the Sahebs. Bakha's wishes and aspirations are as human as any one else's. Bakha's desire for foreign clothes and aspiration for learning English could signify his vague hankering for a different way of life. He has the normal urges of a teenager, wanting to taste

good food, smoke and play games. Anand here could also be countering the misapprehensions about the untouchables: they eat carcass, live in unhygenic condition and wear dirty clothes by their own choice. One recalls the prejudices of Moorthy in Raja Rao's Kanthapura when he entered an untouchable home for the first time. Even though intellectually he had stopped believing in caste, instinctivelly he recoiled from drinking water because he imagined a stench coming from the backyard of Rachama's house.

The untouchables provided the caste Hindus with their labour doing all sorts of menial jobs and getting paid in cash and kind. We see Bakha in the market spending the little cash he had earned. When Bakha goes to the silversmith's gully we see him getting paid in food. The Hindu community fed the untouchables, but the food they offered was fit for the dustbin. Rakha, Bakha's brother has collected the food which is "full of broken pieces of chapatis, some whole ones and lentil curry in a bowl". It becomes clear to the readers that if untouchables eat leftovers, it is because they have no option. They cannot till land and produce their own food, nor can they earn enough to buy raw material for cooking at home.

The dietary world of the untouchable has been explored by other writers also. In some places the untouchables have been shown as eating dead animals. Sivarama Karanth in his novel Chomanadudi presents the eponymous hero fondly eating the meat of a dead buffalo. When the peasant announces to Choma the death of his she-buffalo, Choma is supposed to have jumped and danced with joy anticipating a feast. Karanth writes, "Inwardly very happy, Choma pretended lack of interest".[14] The scene obviously projects the biased view of a caste Hindu novelist. Karanth fails to see the truth that the untouchables do not eat carcasses out of their choice but to live and survive when there is absolutely no other way of getting their food.

Another writer of this century Sivasankara Pillai in his novel Scavenger's Son not only condemns the upper caste prejudice that "A scavenger who cleaned up dirt was compelled to eat dirt"[15] but also clarifies the overt statements through his character Chudalamuttu. Chudalamutu, though, a scavenger does not allow his son, Mohan to do scavenging duty. Instead he sends him to school and hopes that his son will not be a scavenger. Contrary to Chudalamuttu's belief the upper castes people treat Mohan as a scavenger inspite of his cleanliness, education etc. This enrages Chudalamuttu and he reveals

himself:

> "It seemed to Chudalamuttu that he should take a pot with him in the morning. Everything he got from the house the previous day's mouldy payasam or the water, the rice had been washed in, or the stale porridge; all this he should put in the pot, set it on the muckcart and bring it back to give to the child. That was the way he should grow up. A scavenger's child could not grow up without eating that dirt. Even if he did not give it to the child, the child would want it. That dirt was something a scavenger's child found more tasty than biscuits. For a relish for that sort of thing was inherited".[16]

The recently available Dalit Literature counters such bias seen in the writing of even sympathetic upper caste writers like Shivaram Karanth when they are writing about untouchables. Bandu Madhava's powerful Marathi short story The Poisoned Bread (1992) makes a telling point about food, specially about the age - old and dehumanizing tradition of collecting food from the upper castes, which makes them slaves for ever. As the story goes, Yetalya, an old Mahar is driven away from his duty by Bapu Patil without any payment for his day-long

labour. For his survival, Yetalya has to collect the stale crumbs smeared with dung and urine left by the oxen of Bapu Patil. The old man dies after eating these crumbs. Before his death he makes a statement urging all the untouchables of the land to give up the old habit of eating leftover food and to educate themselves as much as possible to fight against exploitation. Using bread as the metaphor for physical as well as psychic degradation he says:

> ".....never depend on the age old - bread associated with our caste. Get as much education as you can. Take away this accursed bread from the mouths of the Maharas. This poisonous bread will finally kill the very humanness of man". [17]

Through repeated humiliation Bakha becomes conscious of the injustice on which his entire life is based. There is this moment of truth when he broods alone, and after that can no longer accept his fate like his father or even his brother. The end of the novel Untouchable brings Bakha in contact with people who offer him solutions to his problem. The British clergyman of the town - Hutchionson, Mahatma Gandhi and the poet Iqbal Nath Sarashar - the three offer him their

sympathies and suggestions for the eradication of the discriminatory system of untouchability.

The Padre's abstract Christian discourse fully studded with biblical quotations does not interest or convince Bakha because both the rhetoric and ideas are alien to him. Moreover we feel the author himself is reluctant to give this solution the importance it deserves since the representation of the wife of the missionary borders on caricature. Her angry outburst on "dirty bhangis and chamars" can undo all the kind words of Mr. Hutchinson and exposes their unreality. Mary Hutchinson's tirade drives Bakha away. Anand reduces Bakha's attraction for the Padre to a matter of two old trousers which Bakha longed to get from him. In Sivrama Karanth's Chomanadudi, like Bakha the hero is confronted with Christianity as a solution to his misery. Conversion might have solved his immediate problems, but he rejects Christianity for very personal reasons of faith and identity, even though he cannot articulate his stand properly. Anand thus is not alone among the Hindu upper caste writers who oppose casteism and conversion in the same breath.[18]

Anand seems to bring in Gandhi's visit to Bulandshahar as a climatic event in the novel only because of his (Gandhi's) sympathies for the

untouchables. The dividing line between the "real Gandhi" and "fictitious Gandhi" is very thin. Even Anand had to quote some lines from real Gandhi's speech on untouchability in his fiction (for example, "I regard (the) untouchable as the greatest blot on Hinduism and so on [19]) to make his point clearer. The preaching of the fictional Gandhi in this novel that untouchables should realise that they are cleaning Hindu society, as it were, implies that a bhangi should remain a bhangi for ever and not aspire to be anything else. He also says that untouchability is not just a social question but a moral and religious one. This corresponds to the belief of the historic Gandhi indirectly supported Varanshrama Dharma. Bhiku Parekh's comment on this is relevant here: "By taking a narrowly religious view of untouchability, Gandhi not only reinforced harijan passivity but also betrayed his own profound political insight that no system of oppression could be ended without the active involvement and consequent political education and organisation of its victims".[20]

But Anand's portrayal of the Hindu society and the practice of untouchability is very different from Gandhi's understanding of the problem. Anand's socialistic and materialistic understanding of the situation interrogates Gandhi's religious and moral stand

on untouchability. Calling the untouchable `Harijan' Gandhi made them into the children of god, but acknowledged their separateness nevertheless. Anand presents, to a certain extent, both Gandhi and the padre as mystics, because they both talk of ignorance and sin rather than of economic and social inequity.

Bakha at the end of the day hears about a machine which has the potential to liberate him from the manual task of carrying filth. This captures his imagination and lingers in his mind as he starts towards his home. The fact that he receives this information from a poet is also significant. Anand seems to be suggesting that the technology that would give him freedom is part of the futuristic vision of the poet of a new era. The first option, Christianity, is not for a moment considered seriously by Bakha. The two things that remain in his mind are - Gandhi and the machine. He dreams of the future and wants to share the dream with his family from whom he had felt estranged earlier in the day.

Untouchable is an open ended novel and not a novel like Scavenger's Son which ends in scavengers' forming a union. Through this well - organised union the scavengers of Alleppey in Scavenger's Son have learnt to speak with a united voice. The result is, "Today's scavenger knows how much he earns; he has also learnt to

get change for his money without getting cheated. He even has the nerve to want more wages....."[21] Apart from this, Pillai gives the scavengers of Alleppey human dignity. To quote him,

> " There is a widespread complaint that scavengers are insolent. If you try to substantiate that complaint, you will get the answer that they are indeed insolent.....you should see the way he walks in the evening ! He uses talcum powder, he wears a jubba, he smokes cigarrettes he is not subservient....
> ... The Alleppey scavenger has learnt quite a bit. He knows quite a bit. He knows how to think on the basis of what he knows and so get to know more. So he behaves as one lost in thought. He has realised that a scavenger is a human being".[22]

While Anand explores In Untouchable, the humiliations and frustrations of an adolescent whose only sin is that he is born in a sweeper family, he does not offer a neat solution to Bakha's problem. The novel was written at a time when even legal or constitutional measures had not been taken to correct the social inequality in India, and the writer himself was not sure in which direction a future solution might lie. Today,

after half a century we know that mere changes in the legal system do not transform the values of society. Of the three possibilities suggested at the end off Untouchable Anand's outright rejection of Christianity can be seen in his mocking attitude to the Hutchinson. Gandhi's words are emotionally soothing to Bakha, but the real change in the material condition of a scavenger, Anand seems to suggest, can be brought about by technological innovation that will free him from the degradation of manually carrying other people excrement. This fits in with its his progressive ideology and faith in human progress achieved through reason and science.

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18. Anand's rejection of conversion as a way out of the treat of untouchability can be seen as a part of the third world novelist's attempt to build the hegemony of the West and to evolve what Marakand Paranjape calls `the contestatory model of the third world novel'. Karanth's fiction can also be read profitably such a

perspective. See M. Paranjape, The Ideology of Form: Notes on the Third World Novel, The Journal of CWL Vol. XXVI, No. 1 1991.

19. Mulk Raj Anand, Untouchable. p. 163.

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CHAPTER II

GODAN

= I =

It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that the peasants began to be represented as fictional characters in Indian novels. Lal Behari Day's Govinda Samanta (Peasant life in Bengal: 1874) a novel in English is perhaps the first work of fiction to deal completely with peasant life. The Oriya novel Chhamana Athaguntha (Six Acres and Eight Decimals : 1898) by Fakirmohan Senapati is chronologically the next; it focuses on the zamindari as well as other exploitative social systems in Orissa under the colonial rule. Fakirmohan's novel may be seen as an early precursor of Premchand's novel Godan (Hindi: 1936) the plot of which revolves around the trapped life of a poor peasant, Hori. In the four decades between Senapati's novel in 1898 and Premchand's novel in 1936 many novels appeared in different Indian languages that focussed either fully or partially on the lives and fates of peasants in India, but Godan occupies a special place in Indian fiction because it is the most incisive and moving human document about the different kinds of oppression the peasant in India is subjected to, and it also captures the paradoxes

inherent in the transition from the agrarian to industrial way of life in India. Although located in Uttar Pradesh, the novel is a crucial text in understanding certain pan-Indian process including the uneasy shift from the feudal to the capitalist mode of economy in our country.

= II =

Realism in Hindi fiction was in its infancy when Premchand appeared on the scene in the first decade of our century. Before him narratives concerned with the miraculous, magical and fabulous incidents were among the most popular,Devaki Nandana Khatri's celebrated triology Chandra Kanta (1895) Chandrakanta Santati (1896) and Bhootnath (1897) setting unprecedented records in sales. Pseudo -historical novels set in the past, like Kishori Lal Goswami's Tara or Kshatrokula Kamalini (1902) were also widely read. The so-called social novels like Srinivasa Das's Pareeksha Guru (1882) were largely vehicles of didacticism or cultural propaganda.

The advent of Premchand in the early part of twentieth century signifies the beginning of a new era in Hindi / Urdu narrative literature. Premchand gave to fiction a social awareness, a new sense of purpose and introduced fidelity to the details of observed reality.

Subsequently in his hands the Hindi novel came to represent a segment of life that had not been handled in literature before. Through his participation in the progressive writers' movement he became a people's writer who chose to write about the life of common folk in a language they could understand. Unlike the writers of the Bharatendu era his appeal goes much beyond the close circle of intelligetnsia and his short stories and novels considerably widened the readership of Hindi fiction.

Premchand first started writing novels in Urdu in 1905. His Hindi writing started with the publication of Sevasadan (1917) which deals with the problem of prostitution in society. Considered by some as Premchand's best work, the novel brings to the fore the evil consequences of a system that breeds a middle class which makes a show of a moral standard that it is unable to maintain without accepting illegal gratification. However, instead of making us look down on Suman and Bholi with contempt, who are the victims of the system in the novel, Premchand arouses in us feelings of pity for their lot and makes us sympathise with them.

Thereafter Premchand wrote about a dozen novels in Hindi. Some of them were: Premashram (1921),

Rangabhumi (1925), Kayakalpa (1925), Varadana (1921), Nirmala (1927), Karmabhumi (1932) and Godan (1936). He also wrote almost two hundred and fifty short stories, some of them now well known in many other languages of India also.

Pratigya (1927) which belongs to the same category of fiction as Sevasadan, attempts to create a critical awareness about social maladies - is an extended version of Prem, a short story that Premchand wrote in 1905. It deals with the problem of widow remarriage. Premchand exposes the ruthless custom which condemns widows to a miserable life. According to critics like Inder Nath Madan Pratigya is more like a thesis on the condition of widows in Hindu society than a novel portraying flesh and blood characters[1].

Nirmala deals simultaneously with two social problems: the system of dowry and the marriage of a young girl with an old widower, turning our sympathy to the predicament of the young girl who is the object of double exploitation.

Premashram is an agrarian epic, dealing with the entire social and economic structure of village life before the impact of industrial civilization. It is a world of landlords and their tenants. The landlords

supported by government officials and their henchmen come into conflict with peasants in a village. A strife between the two groups of society is depicted on a large canvas, expanding the theme of the novel from a clash of individuals to a conflict of classes. Premchand exposes through this narrative the exploitation of peasants by landlords and their agents.

In Premchand's analysis the traditional village economy which was based on mutual co-operation and co-existence was slowly eroded because the new values disrupted this principle of co-existence. Industrialization is predicated upon competition, the profit motive and individual economic gain. He felt that the new civilization by promoting the vested interests of 'merchant-landlords' and their complicity with the industrialists, had completely ruined the old village economy and consequently the organic social order. Rangabhumi embodies this conflict in one of the most graphic and comprehensive forms. Gandhi emerged in the Indian political arena in 1920. Premchand was one of the earliest novel writers to fictionalize his ideas. Deeply imbued by Gandhian ideology, Surdas, a Harijan by birth in this novel, believes in ahimsa and the power of love to win over the opponents. He becomes the custodian of the welfare of the people of Pandepur.

Karmabhumi deals with the No Tax campaign of 1929, a year of terrible economic depression in India. It had become difficult for the cultivators to pay their land revenue. The tenants revolted against their landlords. This novel, one of the landmark books written by Premchand, introduces participation of women in political movements, and also highlights the issue of untouchability which had assumed serious proportions in the early thirties. This led to Gandhi's epic fast to protest against Ramsay McDonald's Communal Award relating to the depressed classes in September 1932 by which time, incidentally Premchand's novel had already been published. This shows that Premchand was sufficiently agitated about a problem that was gaining crucial importance in the country and was at the forefront of the political and social thinking of the time.

In these novels dealing with agrarian problems, Premchand generally treated the peasants as a class fighting against both fate and the human agents of oppression. Victims of an oppressive bureaucracy, rapacious landlords, ruthless capitalists, and hypocritical priests they had very little chance of a decent life. All these upper classes and castes collaborated to grind down the helpless peasants to a miserable existence. In his last and possibly best novel,

Godan, most of these themes converge, but here the protagonist is not merely the representative of a class, he is a concretized individual who is given a subjectivity. In the novel we see the pernicious grip of the landlord as well as the industrialist on one helpless family. Whether in the field or in the factory, the worker is caught in inexorable cycle of toil and debt. The characters are drawn from both rural and urban areas, with considerable movement between the two. Hori who is a small farmer in the beginning of the novel becomes a landless labourer at the end and dies without fulfilling any of his modest dreams. His son Gobar constitutes the other strand of the story. Rebelling against the condition of the rural peasantry he goes to Lucknow and becomes a factory worker. The process of urbanization and industrialization ultimately turns him into a sub-human and marginalized human being, even more miserable than what he was in the village, nameless and faceless in the city. Godan is perhaps the only novel where Premchand does not offer any solution to the problems he represents in the text.

= III =

Godan tells the story of a peasant who is poor, simple, and innocent by nature. Writing the novel in the colonial set up Premchand draws our attention to the

discrete powers of landlords, moneylenders and the bureaucrats - a composite apparatus of dominance over the peasant. Hori's subjection to this triumvirate - the sarkari, the sahukari, and the zamindari - was primarily political in character, economic exploitation being only one, albeit the most obvious, of its several aspects. Ranajit Guha describes the condition of the Indian peasant in the following words:

> "The appropriation of his (peasant farmer) surplus was brought about by the authority wielded over local societies and markets by the landlord-money-lenders and secondary capitalism working closely with them and by the encapsulation of that authority in the power of colonial state. Indeed, the element of coercion was so explicit and so ubiquitous in all their dealings with the peasant that could hardly look upon his relationship with them as anything but political"[2].

Squeezed by all the above mentioned forces the peasant loses its power of resistance. Thus Hori's condition embodies the situation of the Indian peasant community as a whole. At the same time he is also an individual whose dream, aspiration, ambition and human failings are specifically his own.

Hori is a small tenant farmer under the zamindar Rai Saheb Amar Pal Singh cultivating less than an acre of land to feed himself, his wife Dhania, his son Gobar, and his two daughters Sona and Rupa. The extent of his poverty is indicated by the author by mentioning the fact that three of his children died in infancy without medical treatment. Howsoever hard he might work, he is unable to pay the land revenue, and gets increasingly involved in debt. At thirty six he is an old man, his body emaciated, his hair all grey, his eye-sight weakened.

Zamindar Rai Saheb is the immediate oppressor of Hori and his community. As a man involved in the freedom struggle Rai Saheb puts on khadi and is a believer in the Congress ideology. He had resigned his seat in the Council and courted arrest in the Satyagraha movement. His extortions from the tenants are in no way less than those of other zamindars, but his association with the Congress has created such a benign image that his misdeeds are thought to be those of his agents. Despite the appearance of a liberal, Rai Saheb is actually deeply entrenched in the old feudal values. That is why when the labourers refuse 'forced labour' he is wild with rage. When the editor of local newspaper - the Bijli - voices the grievances of the peasants, he buys up the

newspaper's loyalty with the subscription for a hundred copies. He raises five hundred rupees from his poor peasants on the occasion of Dhanush Yagya, to be spent on the drinks of his elite friends from the city. When Hori is fined by the village panchayat of Belari, Rai Saheb feels that injustice has been done to Hori and he orders that the money should be returned. The money, however, goes not to Hori but to the coffers of the Rai Saheb.

This is one facet of Rai Saheb. Contrary to Ranajit Guha's view that the zamindar and tenant relationship is only political, Premchand also highlights the other human aspect of Rai Saheb where he stands as a father figure to all his tenants. Inspite of the exploitation by the zamindar the tenants feel a sense of security under him. Premchand's intention here is to give an example of an organic village system where everybody is known to each other and feel interlinked even though the relationship may be hierarchical or asymentrical. This, as we see later, contrasts with the city life where even neighbours are strangers to each other. But this may be a rather schematic and simplistic view of the urban-rural dichotomy. Andre Beteille makes a distinction between the past and present conditions of village life analysing how the integrated social order in villages has now disintegrated:

> "In contemporary perspective the relations between landlord and tenant, creditor and debtor, or master and servant appear clearly exploitative in nature. On the other hand, this perspective itself was significantly different in the past from what it is today. In the past social world of village was permeated by hierarchical values. Not only were different people unequally placed, but each knew where he belonged and was in a large measure reconciled to his place in the total scheme of things. This contributed to the stability of the design that was distinctive of the village in the past".[3]

Even within a so called organic village there has always been socio-economic exploitation. That is why Rai Saheb in Godan does not feel guilty for his conduct and actually comes to believe that he is a socialist who is helping the peasants. His urban friend Mehta is scathing in his criticism of Rai Saheb's double standard. He says:

> "I want life to be based on definite principles. You wish the peasant's welfare - you want to give them concessions - you want

> the rights of the zamindars to be cut - you go further and say the zamindars are a curse on society. Yet you are a zamindar and remain one - like a thousand other zamindars. If you believe in giving the peasants a fair deal, why not set the ball rolling yourself? Give them tenancy rights without accepting gifts; abolish forced labour; do not push up land revenue; set apart lands for grazing. I have no sympathy for those who talk like communists and live like princes".[4]

Mehta is a somewhat idealised figure in the novel Godan, hence he is made to voice the author's own criticism of the Rai Saheb's seemingly benevolent duplicity.

This ambivalence of Rai Saheb who can be a feudal lord and a socialist at the same time reminds one of another fictional landlord in a Kannada novel by Sivarama Karanth written a little before Godan. In Chomandudi (1933) Sankappayya is kind to his tenant Choma and is willing to gift him some land so that the poor man, a "holeya" can realize his dream of being a landowner. Yet at the same time Sankappayya is prevented from doing so because his mother is against the idea of a low-caste man possessing land. Sankappayya sees no

contradiction between his intention and his action and instead of helping Choma's family, he continues to exploit them absentmindedly and becomes a silent onlooker to Choma's tragedy.

Both Sivarama Karanth and Premchand are master story-tellers who know that human beings are not diagrammatically divided into black and white, and individual inclinations are often at odds with larger structures of social norms. Premchand wrote Godan in a transitional phase of Indian history where the old feudal system was about to be replaced by the newly emerging capitalist order. He draws our attention to the exact modes of change that was going to transform Indian society. In the novel Rai Saheb himself knows that his future is doomed. He tells Hori,

> " There is every indication that my class of people is about to be wiped out,and I for one am ready to welcome that day. May God bring it soon. It'll be a day of salvation for us". [5]

While this sounds like a liberal manifesto welcoming a classless utopia, in reality this may be an expression of Rai Saheb's helplessness under the newly emergent capitalist system. He has to seek the help of

Mr. Khanna, the capitalist, for his daughter's marriage and also to contest in the Legislative Council election. It is clear that power has shifted from the landed gentry to the mercantile class.

Yet Premchand seems to be occupying that uneasy space from where he can see the evils of capitalism much more clearly than the exploitativeness of the older Zamindari system. He thinks of the zamindars as "the victims of circumstances" and chooses his words very carefully not to castigate them too severely. In retrospect it seems to us today that the capitalists actually emerged from the same class as the zamindars. Earlier land was their only power - subsequently their holds on the people multiplied. When the Zamindari Abolition Act was passed in 1951, the dispossessed landlords came to dominate the underclass in many different ways. Elizabeth Whitecombe writes of the consequences of the Abolition Act. Citing an example of the Congress government policy of the late 1960s she examines how the government policy has always been pro-zamindars:

> "In the new capital-intensive agricultural strategy, introduced into the provinces in the 1960s, the Congress government had the means to realize the imperial dream :

progressive farming amongst the gentry. Within a year or two of the programme's inception, virtually every district could field a fine crop of demonstration ex-zamindars - the Rai Sahibs with their 30-, 40-, 50-, 100-acre holdings, their multiplication farms of the latest Mexican wheat and Philippines paddy, their tube well gushing out 16,000 gallons an hour, much of it on highly profitable hire, their tractors, their godowns stacked with fertilizer, there cold-stores - and their groves, their rights over fairs and bazars, their brothers and sons in the civil service and industry, the army and police sending regular remittances to swell the family accounts in pre-Mutiny fashion...in short,a tenth of the zamindari, but ten times the income".[6]

Thus the evolution of capitalism and its own brand of exploitation was replacing the exploitative characteristics of the zamindari system. Mr Khanna who represents this new class in the novel Godan is seen as more calculating and impersonal than Rai Saheb. As we have seen earlier, under the zamindari system the tenants had a human contact with their landlord and felt a sense

of security. But in a capitalist order economics is the only operative force, and human beings become faceless entities. Like Rai Saheb, Mr Khanna is also a nationalist and has courted imprisonment during the satyagraha movement. His opening of a sugar mill is injurious to the farmers since he buys sugarcanes directly from them in very cheap rates. Even while going for shikar in the forest he does not leave his money-making instinct behind. He buys medicinal roots from a rustic vendor with the intention of selling them at a profit to guillible customers in the city. When his mill catches fire and is burnt down, reducing him from a millionaire to the state of bankruptcy, he admits the malpractices that he has been carrying on- under weighing, bribery and corruption.

Premchand was a bitter critic of capitalism. In his essay Mahajani Sabhyata (The Capitalist Civilization) he perceives the profit motive as being responsible for all evils in modern society. He writes:

> "In this capitalist society the one motivation for all action is money....it is the capitalists who rule the world today. Human society has been divided into two sections. The bigger section comprises the tillers and toilers, while the smaller section comprises those who through their

might and influence hold the larger section and take no pity on it whatever. This section exists merely so that it may sweat for its master and bleed for its master and one day quietly depart from the world".[7]

Apart from the zamindar and the capitalist there are moneylenders who contribute to the exploitation of the poor peasant. In this novel while there is one Rai Saheb to represent feudal values and one Khanna to give us a taste of capitalist ethos, there are at least six moneylenders. There is patwari, Pateswari Shah ; there is Jhinguri Shah ; there is Nokhe Ram; there is Mangaru Shah ; there is Dulari Sahuyayin with her mask of feminine kindness ; and there is Datadin, a Brahmin with the sanction of religion behind him - all leeches who suck the blood of the peasant. There are so many of them because money lending is by far the easiest and the most profitable business.

The cruelty of the moneylending system is shown vividly in a farcial drama staged by the villager. The peasant comes, falls at the feet of the Thakur and weeps. After much pleading the Thakur agrees to loan him ten rupees. The necessary formalities take place: he hands over the man five rupees. The peasant is taken aback.

"These are only five rupees, my masters".

"They are ten. Go and count them again at home."

"No, Sir, they are five."

"One rupee goes for my gratification. Right?

"Yes, Sir."

"One for writing the paper itself. Right?

"Yes, Sir,"

"One for the paper itself. Right?

"Yes, Sir.

"One as my customary fee. Right?

"Yes, Sir."

"One as my interest. Right?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Five rupees in cash. That makes ten. Right?"

"Better keep these five too with you"

"Nonsense!"

" I mean it, Sir. One rupee as my gift to your younger wife. One for the elder. One rupee to buy betel leaves for the elder wife. And one for the younger. That makes four. The fifth rupee is for your funeral rites." [8]

The telling skit performed by the village youth shows the only way the poor can subvert the oppression - through humour and parody. In the actual business of life they are completely powerless. As an instance, when Shoba, Hori's younger brother, asks him if they will ever

be free from the clutches of the moneylenders, Hori says, "Not in this life, at least. We don't want luxuries. We want plain food, some cloth and life with honour. Even these we are denied"[9]

Despite minor variations, conditions in Indian village remain virtually the same across time and also across regions. The situation in Godan reminds one of a novel written in Oriya thirty eight years before it: Chhamana Athaguntha (Six Acres and Eight Decimals) by Fakirmohan Senapati. The society which Senapati recreates is also society in a transitional phase. In Godan Premchand presents the picture of a society which gradually moves from a feudal set up to a capitalist stage, where the form of oppression is much more complex than earlier. Where as in Chhamana Athaguntha.[10] Senapati writes about a society which experiences changes, but very slowly. Orissa came to be ruled by the British Government in 1803 and witnessed a series of fundamental changes in the sphere of public administration. Against this background Senapati writes Chhamana Athaguntha. That is why as we see in the novel there is shifting of the centre of gravity of the Oriya society from the decaying countryside to the flourishing town. There is also disintegration of feudal culture and emergence of a moneylending class in the villages; while in the town, a

new elite comes into existence under the impact of British liberal education. These new classes are the moneylenders and the lawyers. In Orissa the introduction of the concept of land as private property by the British revenue system helped to build up these powerful groups.

The acquisitive landlord - cum - moneylender Ramachandra Mangaraj's attempt to occupy six point eight acres of land belonging to poor Bhagia and Saria, a weaver couple, is the central action of the novel. Mangaraj's villany and Bhagia's innocent suffering may suggest universal human situations but in the novel they are the products of a historical process in which a feudal society was painfully adapting itself to the needs of an alien system. In fact, Chhamana Athaguntha reveals an insight into the changing composition of the ruling class in the early decades of the nineteenth century.[10] In the novel the zamindari of Govindpur belongs initially to a feudal family. Then it is taken over by an extravagant Muslim trader. After that it passes onto the hands of Ramachandra Mangaraj, the protagonist of the novel. At the end of the novel, finally, the zamindari is transferred to a small town lawyer. In Godan though we do not find this kind of shifts of the ruling class there is a hint in the novel

that the power structure changes from the feudal landlord Rai Saheb to the capitalist Mr. Khanna. Also due to this power struggle the severe consequences fall on a poor peasant like Hori who from time to time changes his occupation: from a tenant to a share-cropper to become a land less daily wage labourer.

It will be in order here to make a comparison between Fakirmohan's Chhamana Athaguntha and the Dickens's Hard Times since both the novels represent critique of utilitarianism.[11] Dickens wrote his earlier novels such as Hard Times and Bleak House (1852) at a time when victorian England was changing itself under the pressure of new political and economic forces. In the fifties the middle class in England had already gained ascendancy and the old, aristocratic values had almost vanished. Hard Times depicts a society where the business middle class of England had already established themselves on a firm-footing. Utilitarianism is the primary creed of this middle-class. Very soon the middle-class businessmen came to rule the industrial towns. They adopted the policy of means to achieve their ends. They did nothing by hands; they followed the rule and calculative contrivance applying their reasons.

The societies of Chhamana Athaguntha and Hard Times tend to differ due to their cultures. But the

transitional character of the society has been highlighted by both the novelists. The process of transition is complete in Hard Times while in Chhamana Athaguntha it is yet to reach its completion. However, social order of both the novels appear to be acquisitive, materialistic and oppressive. Both the novelists believe in the idea of domestic happiness, as the resolution or more likely, the counterpoise to social evil that we find in Premchand's Godan also. Even more vital to them is the idea of pure love as the means of redemption of flawed, weak and sinful men.

In Godan, apart from the oppression of the landlord, the industrialist and the moneylenders, Hori is also exploited by the colonial officials and the Brahmin priest, a traditional oppressor in the Hindu society. Even the men of his own community put pressure on him. Hori's desire to own a cow is fulfilled for a brief period, but the series of his misfortunes begin when his brother Hira poisons the cow depriving him of his life's dream. Then comes the police who takes a bribe. The village panchayat fines Hori two hundred rupees for letting pregnant Jhunia stay in his house after being deserted by his son, Gobar. Pateswari, the representative of the colonial administration threatens Hori with due consequences if he fails to pay the revenue. The conduct

of the other colonial officials is described by Ram Sewak, one of Hori's son-in-laws thus:

> "The police and the law courts are supposed to safeguard our interests, but they never do any justice. There is loot all round ; the poor and the helpless always suffer. God grant that no one should turn dishonest. Dishonesty is a great crime, but it looks as if to fight for justice and one's rights is a still greater crime these days. The poor peasant is grist for every will. If he does not grease the palm of the revenue clerk, he suffers; if he does not humour the Zamindar's men, he suffers. As for the Police Inspector and the constables, they think they are the peasant's son-in-law. Whenever they visit the village, every peasant has to gratify them or the long arm of the law falls heavily on him. And think of the number of officials who come on tour to the village - tehsildar, deputy collector, collector, commissioner....."[12]

Hemmed in by all these demands and threats Hori like other poor peasants is reduced to an existence without hope.

The presence of two Brahmin characters - Datadin and Matadin give a caste dimension to the cycle of oppressions in the novel. In the transitional society where capitalism is replacing feudalism and allowing sufficient social space to a moneylending class, the brahmin is also adopting a new profession to better his material position. That is why Datadin is a moneylender in the novel. Having sufficient financial resources in his hands in addition to the existing caste privileges he is now in a better position to exploit poor peasants like Hori. Like the zamindar Rai Saheb and the capitalist Mr. Khanna in the novel, Datadin tries to make an estate of his own where Hori works at first as his share - farmer. Finally Hori loses his plot of land and becomes a daily wage labourer and ends up by dying of overwork and exhaustion. Datadin's exploitation of Hori does not stop there. The moneylender now reappears in the shape of a priest with all the sanction of religion and custom of Hindu society behind him and demands that a cow be offered for Hori's salvation. But there is no cow in the house ; nor is there money for it. There are only twenty annas in the house - Hori's previous night's earnings from making ropes. Dhaniya, Hori's wife brings it, puts it into the hand of the Brahmin and says:" Maharaj, there

is neither a cow, nor a calf nor any money in the house. This is all the money I have, this is all I can give. Take this in place of the cow".[13]

This kind of Brahmanic exploitation is not new in the traditional Hindu society. Since the brahmin is the law maker and the law giver in social rituals, the rules are generally in his favour. As the priestly class the brahmins have enjoyed special privileges and powers in Hindu society. That is why Matadin, Datadin's son who is a sensual character in the novel Godan, molests a low caste chamar girl, Selia who, due to her poor socio-economic conditions, is vulnerable. Even though Selia gives birth to a child fathered by Matadin she is never accepted as wife but treated like a domestic servant. She works hard day and night in order to get nothing but two meals a day and sometimes a sari. She works like a machine to improve the economic standard of the Brahmin family at the same time satisfying the sexual need of a Brahmin's son. Premchand perceives a certain permanence about the power of the brahmins in the caste Hindu society of rural India. He makes Datadin comment on the strength of his position:

> "As long as the Hindu community lasts, the Brahmin's position is safe. The Zamindar may

vanish but our patrons will remain intact. We easily make a few hundred rupees every year, if our luck is extra good, we make much more. The Zamindar and the moneylender cannot lead the carefree life we do".[14]

Even though Premchand is depicting a transitional society where certain new norms and values are replacing the old ones the Brahmin sees himself as invincible. The downward change is most visible in Hori's life. In the beginning a tenant farmer under the zamindar Rai Saheb, he becomes a marginalized landless farmer under the Brahmin moneylender Datadin. At the end he becomes a daily wage labourer losing all his land and working on the roadway. On the other hand we see Datadin, who is a Brahmin by caste is now gaining an added privilege of the moneyed class through his successful career in usury. Thus, it can be said that the transitional period affected Indian society as a whole making certain groups more powerful than before and making some of the poor, poorer.

More than half a century later, today's reader sometimes feels exasperated with Hori's attitude of resignation. Not once does he show anger or rebelliousness against those who victimize him. Almost in all the situations he accepts his fate as god-given. The

past is Hori's only argument. He is a slave to custom, he is superstitious, he acts and behaves exactly in the same way as did his forefathers. And he does so because they did so. He is unable to offer a coin at the alter of the idol at the annual katha and feels remorseful - not because he is poor but because he fears the wrath of the gods for not continuing the practice of his forefathers. V.S. Naravane argues that any Indian farmer in place of Hori would have acted in the same manner. To quote him:

> "Hori had all the limitations of the typical Indian farmer. He was superstitious. He submitted to every kind of injustice and humiliation heaped upon him, attributing them to Karma, and to social conventions which were inexorable to Karma. These limitations were not his own, he had inherited them from the tradition to which he belonged. What belonged to him was his generosity".[15]

In fact, Hori's generosity is at times excessive. It is very difficult to understand why he refuses to name his brother Hira as the killer of the newly acquired cow ; why he beats his wife mercilessly because she blurts out the secret ; why he borrows money to bribe the police inspector who threatens to search his

brother's house ; why he helps out on the farm of his runaway brother much to the detriment of his own family. There are many examples of such inconsistencies which make Hori appear to be little too unreasonable, too naive, almost imbecile. What we need to understand here is not whether Hori is life-like, but what are the values Premchand wishes to project through him. Literary representation is never free of ideology. While it is enough to condemn Hori for not being rebellious the structural pattern of the novel demands an acquiescent protagonist to be put in binary opposition to a rebel hero.

In contrast to Hori is his son Gobar who chafes against the restrictions his father so readily submits to. We see his rebellion even before he goes to Lucknow. Like Dhania, Gobar does not like Hori's theory that "when your neck is being trampled under the tyrant's heel the safest course is to keep on tickling his feet".[16] Instead, Gobar protests :

> "Why do you humiliate yourself before the Master (Rai Saheb) so often? Does it make any difference? The bailiff still abuses us if we fall behind in rent. We are still put on forced labour. And like others we have to send our gifts too. How does it help to fawn

on him".[17]

While in the city Gobar experiences a new kind of life. Often he attends public meetings and comes to know about some of the country's political problems. Now he understands how the government runs and what class distinction means. He attends panchayat sessions where he finds out that people get off free even after committing crimes much worse than he had committed, and he sees no reason why he should remain in hiding anymore or harbour useless fears. He also adopts a new life-style. He starts smoking cigarettes, purchases a dhoti of fine cloth and a nice pair of shoes and roams the streets of Lucknow imitating the dandies of the town. When he comes back to the village, he is annoyed with his father for accepting tamely all the atrocities of the zamindar and the moneylenders. He wants his father to fight for his rights. When the zamindar's agents make false claims for arrears, Gobar shows his courage by raising a hue and cry and threatens to complain to Rai Saheb. Gobar also asks Hori to refuse to pay ridiculously high rates of interest to Datadin, the Brahmin moneylender. To this extent Gobar has gained self-confidence and courage by moving away from the oppressive rural society where a person's fate is decided by the community. In the process he has also learnt to violate village norms like respect

to elders and deference to upper castes in order to assert his individuality.

But obviously all is not well with the migrant labourer in the city. When Gobar returns to Lucknow from his village he discovers that the place where he used to set up his shop has been occupied by another street vendor and his customers had almost forgotten him. This stands out as a contrast to Belari where everyone knew Gobar and stopped on the road to ask about his welfare. When Gobar joins the sugar mill as a worker he experiences a different kind of life altogether. Crushed by the machine, alienated by the nature of his work and overcome by bodily fatigue he starts drinking. His relationship with his wife gets completely brutalized: he abuses Jhunia, beats her, assaults her and threatens to turn her out of the house.

The novel being a dialogic genre, it is susceptible to this kind of treatment when two different situations and attitudes are posited side by side without drawing any overt comment or privileging one over other. It is the chronicle of the oppressed class. Whether it is farmer or labourer, whether one is passive or rebellious, there is no end to the misery of the poor and no alternative open for them. Thus in the novel Hori meets

his tragic end and the rebellious Gobar is left alone on the stage. Hori's death may either be seen as an inevitable climax to the growing sense of entrapment that society imposes on a landless peasant, or as a ritual sacrifice that redeems humanity. In this connection we remember Stephen Blackpool in Dicken's Hard Times (1854) who fights against the industrialists through the Trade Union but fals into a pit at the end of the novel and dies. Dickens' Stephen Blackpool represents a pervasive weakness in mid-Victorian social thought before the Marxist phase which began in the eighties, Blackpool's idea of struggle is a kind of "Sullen Socialism" that could not achieve maturity in the society of the fifties in England. The death of Blackpool not only symbolizes the murder of the individual human being by the industrial society, it also hints a symbolic triumph of the 'Utilitarians' over the riff-raff of the society.

Despite Blackpool's death Dickens' novel does not end on a bleak note. Though everyone is affected greatly by the industrialization in England, only Sissy Jupe survives and lives a happy life at the end of the novel. She represents the human, pre-industrial values in the book.

There is considerable sentimentalization in Dickens' construction of Sissy Jupe's character. He seems

almost to suggest that an individual's human acts of kindness and generosity can counter the larger economic forces of an era. As a contrast to Hard Times we find in Godan, Hori the representative of the meekness and generosity of the common humanity is eliminated at the end. Fakirmohan's novel Six Point Eight Acres, too offers bleak vision of the future in which the estate passes from the hands of a ruthless village moneylender-cum-landlord into the clutches of a wily urban lawyer. Premchand's vision is far more realistic and unflinchingly ruthless and he seems to have an unerring and instinctive understanding of the economic and political forces that were transforming society in his life time.

Notes and References

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7. Amrit Rai, Premchand: His life and Times (1982). Tran Harish Trivedi, Oxford University Press, New Delhi (1991) pp. 363-4.

8. Premchand, Godan pp. 173-4.

9. Ibid. p. 145.

10. For detail see J.K. Nayak's article, Oriya novel: Decline of Faith in Littcrit (ed) P.K. Rajan, Vol. V, No. 2, Dec. 1979, Kerla Univ. Kariavattom.

11. In our Post-graduate, we were taught to compare Fakirmohan Senapati's novel Chhamana Athaguntha with Charles Dickens's Hard Times for their common theme: utilitarianism. This theme has been extensively discussed by J.K. Nayak and H. S. Mahapatra in their joint, unpublished paper, titled, "Utilitarianism at Home and Abroad: A Comparative study of Fakirmohan Senapati's Chhamana Athaguntha and Charles Dickens's Hard Times".

12. Premchand, Godan. p. 279

13. Ibid. p. 288.

14. Ibid. p. 201.

15. V.S. Naravane, Premchand: His Life and work. Vikash Publishing House, New Delhi (1980) p. 173.

16. Premchand, Godan p. 16.

17. Ibid. p. 16.

CHAPTER III

PARAJA

= I =

In the societal hierarchy of India class and caste are two obvious factors that condition the forces of power and oppression. The previous chapters have examined two fictional texts that focus on inequality. The novel to be analysed in this chapter, Paraja (Oriya: 1945, English translation; 1987) highlights the predicament of a tribal community today and the varieties of exploitation that the people belonging to it have to suffer. Gopinath Mohanty has first-hand experience of the tribes of Koraput region where he has lived, and he writes his two novels, Paraja and Amrutara Santana (Oriya: 1947) moving accounts of the clash between two world views - tribal and non-tribal, the indigenous people confronting the commercial and the bureaucratic forces with bafflement and in- comprehension.

= II =

Defining the English word `tribe´ is not an easy task as it has been changing its connotations over the centuries. The word originates from Latin `tribuz´

referring to the three divisions into which the early Romans were grouped. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the contemporary meaning of the word thus: "a race of people; now applied especially to a primary aggregate of people in a primitive or barbarous condition, under a headman or chief".[1] Romila Thapar has pointed out the word `tribe' in its "precise meaning refers to a community of people claiming descent from a common ancestor," but has been "used to cover a variety of social and economic forms not to mention claims to biological and racial identities; and this tends to confuse the original meaning".[2] Andre Beiteille defines the `tribes' as "people who were considered primitive, lived in backward areas and did not know the use of writing".[3] Barun De and Nripen Bandhyopadhyay define `tribes' as "groups of people who use a common dialect and also observe certain common taboos but whose principal characteristic is that they have not been absorbed into the dominant culture of India, but which remains as social enclaves of underprivilege with the national fabric".[4] Last but not the least Surjit Saha defines the "tribes" which can be appropriately applied to the tribals in Gopinath Mohanty's novel Paraja : "The tribals are population groups which were able to resist effectively the pressures of unequal incorporation into

Hindu society and thus remain outside the parameters of social control by the brahmin elite. Societies which grew in these zones of exclusion from Hinduism created their own separate ethnic and cultural identities, subject to differentiations partly imposed by natural environment and ecology. These zones of exclusion were not only socio-cultural but also territorial". [5]

Today many anthropologists, administrators and scholars prefer the word `aboriginal' to `tribal'. Despite divergent definitions and different views of experts there are some common features possessed by all the tribal groups which have been resisting acculturation or absorption. A.R. Desai makes a list of these:

> " (1) They live away from the civilised world in the most inaccessible parts of both forests and hills; (2) they belong either to one of the three stocks- Negritos, Austoloids or Mongoloids; (3) they speak the (same) tribal dialect; (4) they profess a primitive religion known as `Animism' in which the worship of ghosts and spirits is the most important element; (5) they follow primitive occupations such as gleaning, hunting and gathering of forest produce; (6) they are largely carnivorous or flesh or meat eaters;

(7) they live either naked or semi- naked using tree barks and leaves for clothing ; and (8) they have nomadic habits and a love for drink and dance".[6]

Thus conceived, tribals are a self-contained community, they have a common history, common culture and common government. Since the members of a tribe consider each other to be related by ties of kinship the relationships of production are also homogenous. As a corollary to this, it follows that tribal societies are unstratified. Tribal economy by nature is non-monetised. For a society based on a domestic economy, where producers are themselves the consumers, the role of money is peripheral. One must remember that not all societies labelled as tribal are in the same stage of development within their boundaries, nor do they have the same relationship with the larger society in which they are situated. The Santals in West Bengal, the Thodas in Nilagiri hills and Ooty, the Jenukurubas in Biligiriranga hills in Karnataka, the different hill tribes of North East India and the Kondh and Paraja tribes of Orissa have very different internal organizations and their interaction with the so-called `mainstream´ life is not uniform or similar.

At present, due to developmental activities there are very few tribal communities which are in total isolation. New roads and communication facilities have opened up the remote areas and people have developed contact with the modern world. Most of the tribes, at least in Orissa, Bihar, Andhra and Madhya Pradesh or even in Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur and Tripura have adopted technology or modern agriculture, though not on a very large scale. But this contact may lead to the rapid disintegration of tribal society and the absorption of the aboriginals within the surrounding population, or it may result in conscious and self-chosen seclusion. These two possible alternatives lead one to ask : should the aboriginals be free to follow their inclination in accepting or rejecting the cultural and social patterns of the majority groups around them or should they be compelled or coaxed to abandon their own cultural traditional and values for the sake of a uniform ideal of economic development?

Most of these communities had their own traditional systems of education that socialized the member of the tribe into its own mode of living. The standardised form of education that is now being imposed from above disturbs some of its ethical, moral and cultural norms of the community but is in some ways

inevitable if these people want to get out of their isolation and aspire to a better standard of living.

This tension may be articulated in many scholarly debates in abstract terms, but only literature can give us the nuances of the predicament in a way that our sympathies get directly involved. Whether the autonomy of the tribal society be protected or not is a very troubled issue.

That the Hindu culture otherwise known as, 'Great tradition' tries to incorporate the tribal cultures or the various 'Little traditions' is generally known. On the other hand the tribal people have been in various ways resisting the dominance of high caste culture. History offers evidence of these indigenous people fighting against the 'outsiders' and the new developments in historiography have succeeded in bringing out into the open more such struggles that had not been highlighted earlier. It is this conflict - the tribals against the non-tribals, the slow strangulation of the tribals by the bureaucrats, moneylenders and the destruction of the aboriginal way of life that sets the ground for Gopinath Mohanty's novel Paraja.

= III =

Among the major novelists in Oriya Gopinath Mohanty is remarkable for his epic representation of the changing rhythm of tribal life in his novels Paraja, Amrutara Santana, Dadi Budha, Sibu Bhai, Apahancha, etc. As a government officer he was posted in different parts of Orissa including the tribal district of Koraput. He spent the most energetic years of his life among the tribes -especially Parajas and Kondhs - trying to understand their ways of life and their world view. His total absorption in the landscape and customs of this people gave him a perspective that people outside the tribe seldom acquire. Bikram K. Das in the translator's introduction to Paraja emphasizes Mohanty's first hand-knowledge of the people he was writing about and his involvement with and participation in the lives of the people of the Paraja tribe:

> "The characters he creates are very real people set in a three dimensional landscape. He has known the sounds and smells of jungle he so lovingly evokes ; what is more, he has obviously suffered and exulted with Sukru Jani and his tribe, drunk rice-beer with them, sung their songs, danced at their

harvest festivals and starved with them when the rains failed. The author's intense personal involvement is unmistakable even if one were ignorant of this background of lived and shared experience, and it lends Paraja surging power that very few Indian novels have".[7]

Mohanty's concern for the tribals may be further testified from the following extract which was a petition sent against him to Prime Minister Nehru in January 1951, by the land owners and moneylenders of Koraput where he was posted as a Special Assistant Agent combining the powers of S.D.O. and Subjudge under agency rule:

"To our great calamity and disaster Sri Gopinath Mohanty is posted here as the Special Assistant agent at Rayagada. He is always fond of hillmen and behaves like hillman himself. He very little respects other classes of people before them. He behaves as if only born for Adivasis".[8]

Managahirara Chasa (1940) was Mohanty's first novel. Subsequently he wrote twentytwo novels out of which twenty have been published, and in addition his short stories have been collected in eight volumes. His work can be divided into three main groups. The first

group corresponds to his early service period when he was posted in the tribal district of Koraput. The novels are- Dadi Budha (1944) Paraja (1945), Amrutara Santana (1947), Sibu Bhai (1955) Apahancha (1961) all of them dealing with tribal life. In the second group of novels he focuses on the people living in towns - and brings out the social nuances that differentiate the different castes and classes, and highlights the predicaments of both individuals and communities. These novels are - Harijan (1948), SarataBabunka Gali (1950). Rahura Chhaya (1952), Sapana Mati (1954), Danapani (1955), Lava Bilava (1961) etc. In the last phase he wrote only one novel Matimatala (1964) - a saga of rural life in Orissa.

Paraja deals with the tribal people and begins at a point where their world is still whole, unstratified by the forces from the outside world. They are depicted as simple people, with modest aspirations and carefree lives. The details about the tribe emerge through an account of a small family in a Paraja village at some distance away from Koraput town. It is the saga of how this family, unable to confront the devious forces of the so called 'civilized' world - bureaucracy and greed - gradually faces ruin and devastation.

Amrutara Santana depicts the lives of the Kondhs, a more ancient and more populous group having a philosophy of their own. The simple and lineal features of Paraja are now replaced by a complex organization and shifting relationship which give a deeper and more intense experience of life. The novel basically talks about Puyu, the heroine, who sacrifices herself for the sake of the family and for the hope of a new life to come.

Harijan deals with untouchables who stay in dirty hovels in derelict part of the town as described in Mulk Raj Anand's novel Untouchable and Sivashankar Pillai's Scavenger's Son. The untouchables in Harijan are contrasted with the rich who exploit them and finally drive them out of the limits of the town. In the novel Puni, an untouchable girl was seduced by Aghor, son of a rich contractor who occupies the land of untouchables driving them away.

Danapani narrates the story of a man's rise to high position in the process of which he employs all means including the use of his wife's beauty and youth. In both the above mentioned novels the novelist exposes the so called "civilised" veneer of the urban man to reveal his selfishness and greed.

Laya Bilaya is also set in an urban locale. A family from Calcutta comes to Puri for a short visit. The contact with the sea rejuvenates them and they feel nourished as they have never felt before. They have to go back finally into the drab lifelessness of the metropolis. While the dominant tone in the tribal novels was compassion, the urban characters are handled with sharp and biting irony.

Matimatala traces the life story of a committed young man Rabi, who decides to dedicate his life to serve his fellow villagers instead of taking up a salaried job. His father, a local zamindar does not approve of this. But Rabi sticks to his decision and the rest of the novel deals with his continuous attempts at organizing the village life and the resistances he has to face. In the process the changing structure of rural Oriya life, its strength and weaknesses are laid bare in unique totality.

Though Mohanty's literary world can be interpreted in many ways and although apparently he seems to be dealing with many different worlds, he is really concerned with a single theme in almost all his novels - the conflict of cultures and impact of new civilization on the old. That is why his fictional world

is full of tensions. This epochal experience that almost the whole of our country has gone through during the present century with regional and class community variations, is captured by Gopinath Mohanty with reference to Orissa, specially highlighting the collision of agrarian and technological world views.

= IV =

"Paraja" the name of a tribe (pronounced `Paroja' or `Poroja' in Oriya) is derived from the Sanskrit word `praja' which literarally means the subjects or the common people, as distinguished from the rajas or the zamindars of the pre-independent time. In Oriya language, the word "paraja" denotes `tenants' or `royats'.[9] Befitting the meaning of the term the tribesmen in the novel are thrifty, hard working cultivators in comparison to their relatively primitive counterparts inhabiting adjoining territory. Sukru Jani and his elder son Mandia, strong and hard working are eager to improve their lot with whatever means of betterment of living that the depths of Koraput jungle can offer. The author in the beginning presents a pre-lapsarian world untouched by the acquisitive tendencies of a complex urban life and its people. The Parajas have barter system, a relatively self-sufficient village economy and are on the whole tuned to a harmonious

rhythm of life. The agents of change that enter this world of innocence to cause devastation come from outside. They are the forest guards, the foresters, the excise officials, the magistrates and the other representatives of the administrative and bureaucratic machinery.

In most of Hardy's novels, as in Paraja, we find strangers entering into the unspoilt world of innocence. Farfrae in Mayor of Casterbridge (English: 1886) is an alien who brings about a tragic end to the life of Henchard. In The Woodlanders'. (English: 1887) Edgar Fitzpiers and Mrs. Felice Charmond are outsiders who carry with them an urban value system. When they enter, the static world constituted mainly of Mr. Melbury, Giles Winterborne and Grace disintegrates.

There are two causes which bring about the disintegration of society that we find in both the novels Paraja and The Woodlanders . Firstly it is due to the arrival of urban values in an innocent world and secondly it is the desire for the social upliftment from within the Woodlanders and the Paraja people. Mr. Melbury in The Woodlanders is an established businessman. But he continually wants to raise his status and sends Grace to town for higher education. He wants to marry Grace

above her status so that people will respect him. In Paraja Sukru has his own plot of land but he wants more to make real his dreams for more comfortable position. He wants to get his sons and daughters married and to see grand children. He sees even further:

> "his grandsons are already fathers and the chubby urchins crowding around him are his great-grand children. His line has multiplied. He has a big herd of cattle too: there they are - he counts sixty fine animals. And there in front of long row of houses which are all his, is a large cattle-shed, and this too is his. And there is.....etc".[10]

In Paraja, Sukru Jani's travail begins with the brush with the forest guard, a lecher who covets Sukru's elder daughter Jili. Selling a daughter for money means the violation of the essential values of that tribe, its integrity and honour. Sukru Jani's angry responses to the forest guard's proposal has unfortunate repercussions. The message of refusal, sent through Kau Paraja, triggers off a course of ruthless vindictiveness on the part of the forest guard who brazenly reneges on the permission earlier given to Sukru to cut the trees. Some revenue officers also come down on him with notices of a fine,

the non-payment of which would land him in jail.

There is no choice left for Sukru. At last he chooses paying the fine by borrowing money. And that choice yokes him inexorably to slavery. He becomes the Sahukar's goti or bonded labourer. His agony of being reduced to serfdom is brought out in the aging father's cry as he puts his arm around his son: "Gotis, Tikra ! From today we are gotis, slaves !"[11] Slavery for the self-respecting Paraja is virtually death, yet he will not go to prison which is the only other alternative. Gotihood is horrible but imprisonment is an inconceivable ignominy. In their calculation a jail sentence is eternal disgrace, eternal damnation. Mohanty describes that prison is the greatest terror in the lives of tribals:

> "For the ignorant tribemen, there is no terror greater than the terror of the prison: it is altogether beyond his comprehension for it belongs to a system in which he has no part, though he lives in its fringes. Labour he understands, even unpaid labour under a tyrannical moneylender, for this he is born into, but anyone who goes to jail is for ever stamped a criminal and ostracized. It cripples him socially and econimically the law never relents once it has you in its

toils".[12]

The terror arises out of a total incomprehension of the judcial and penal system under which the tribal officially lives, but which remains as mysterious and malevolent to him as an evil fate.

The emergence of the moneylending class can be traced back to the British rule in India. As we have seen in our first and third chapters that the new British Revenue System of eighteenth century turned land into private property and in the process a new type of society evolved in our country. With the coming of the British to India there came industry and it partly replaced the agricultural set up. In the agricultural set up land was a matter of life and death to the peasants. But the introduction of commerce changed the relationship between man and man to that of tenant and the landlord. Again the introduction of money as the only medium of exchange led the peasants to abject poverty. The British Government would no more take five bags of rice as was the practice with the kings and local zamindars, but demand cash. The natural calamities and especially the famine of 1866 which broke the backbones of most of the Oriya farmers gave rise to the moneylenders who ultimately started grabbing the land of poor peasants. As a result, the farmer became either a landless labourer or a migrant

worker in the town. This issue has been sufficiently dealt in our third chapter while analyzing Premchand's novel Godan.

The oppression of the moneylender follows the same pattern in the tribal village as it does in any other village in India including the village Belari in Uttar Pradesh which Premchand had introduced to us in Godan. In Paraja Ramachandra Bishoi initially started a liquor business and the tribal people sold their land to buy liquor. Later he became a moneylender, giving money for the mortgage of land. He charged such a high interest on the loan taken that there was no possibility for a poor tribal to ever pay up the capital as well as the interest which was computed in a strange complicated manner. As a result he became his goti, a bonded labourer for his whole life. Mohanty graphically describes the process:

> "A tribesman comes to the Sahukar for a loan of mandia, and the Sahukar agreed to let him have it. The deal is closed and, as the man is about to go, the Sahumar asks him:
> "Have you taken your grain" ?
> "Yes, Sahukar", the man says.
> "How much are you taking" ?
> "One putti".

"All right. Now go and tell my clerk that you are taking a putti of mandia. He will write it down in his books".

"The loan is entered in the clerk's ledger".

"Have you informed my clerk?" the Suhukar asks again.

"Yes, Sahukar". The man prepares to leave.

"Wait', the Sahukar says.' You haven't informed my wife. She is inside the house. Go and tell her. And tell my servant also"!

The poor Kondhs or Praja has to inform three other persons, besides Sahukar himself, that he is borrowing a putti of mandia, at fifty percent interest. And each time one entry is made.

Next year, the borrower returns with a putti and half of mandia which should clear him of the debt.

"Is that all ?' the Sahukar asks, looking at the pile of the grain.

"Why, yes, Sahukar. I took one putti, and the interest is half a putti"

"One putti ! Are you mad? you took one putti from me, one putti from my clerk, one putti from my wife, and one putti from my servant.

> How many puttis is that? There counts: one and one and one and one makes four. And the interest of four puttis? Two puttis. So you should have brought six puttis in all ; instead of which you have brought one and a half. Why even the interest is more than that? Do you understand" ?
> "No Sahukar",the bewildered tribesman says. "But, you must be right".
> And the poor man is hooked. A goti is born....."[13].

The chronic indebtedness of the tribals is certainly due to rampant poverty and subsistence economy. Reliable ethnographic evidences prove that the tribal people were not that much handicapped in their struggle for living a carefree life when their places of habitation were isolated and devoid of middlemen and contractors. They were living in self-sufficient economic conditions. Forest wealth was at their disposal to sustain themselves. But unfortunately when their abodes were thrown open as a result of economic development all around, they found themselves completely ill-equipped to enjoy the fruits of development. Outsiders, the so-called `civilized' people, exploited their vulnerability in the absence of any concerted efforts on the part of

administration. With the passage of time, their plight continued to worsen and they have been reduced to the position we find them in today.

The modus operandi of the traditional moneylender is very simple and convenient to the tribal debtors. Whenever a tribal needs money for whatever reason he has to walk a few furlongs or less to reach the moneylender's house where he is always welcome-day in and day out. The moneylender provides him money without any condition, sureties, guarantees and guarantors since an average tribal has very little to offer in the way of movable or immovable property. All that he has is his honest desire to fulfill his loan obligations out of his earnings and some land that he may possess. The moneylender recognises these as good security, and demands mortgaging the tribal's land against the loan. By way of any formality the only thing a debtor has to do is to affix his thumb impression on a blank piece of paper or under a draft which he cannot read.

Since most of the tribal people are illiterate they have no idea of what is being entered in the account books of the moneylender. They put their thumb impression very submissively wherever desired by the moneylender and that seals their fate forever. In many cases these transactions are oral and they cannot afford to approach

a court of law for seeking redress. But even those transactions, which are recorded in the account books, are nothing but legal fictions because of the wrong entries of inflated amounts and the most the poor can do is to call the village panchayat which usually serves the interest of the moneylender. The indebtedness leads to bondedness and land alienation which is exactly happened in Mohanty's Paraja.

Thus the size of the problem of indebtedness is enormous. Indebtedness among tribals does not have only economic dimensions but social and psychological ones too. The term `goti' as defined by Bikram Nanda is as follows:

> "Whatever may be the nature of bondedness, every goti is attached to a particular household that exercises direct control over his labour or products of labour....The indebtedness always multiplies in some kind of geometrical progression. Bondedness is like an autograph in arrear so that once signed it can rarely be erased....Children of goti are in debt before they are born. A goti is, of course, assured of the bare minimum of diet and a roof. He is forbidden to possess means of production (land, plough, cattle,

etc.). The Sahukar may decide to pay the goti a small amount of cash to buy 'luxuries' as a token of his good-will and allow on off day or so on a festive occasion". [14]

The oppression of the moneylender in Mohanty's Paraja is not a new phenomenon in Oriya literature. The historicity of this can be traced back to the colonial rule in Orissa during the nineteenth century when the traditional Oriya society was undergoing structural changes through the incorporation of many new professions. Ramachandra Bishoi's appearance in the Paraja community is not sudden. In literature it is a gradual process continuing from Fakirmohan Senapati's Chhamana Athaguntha (Oriya: 1898). Ramachandra Mangaraj who grabs the land of innocent Bhagia and Saria in Senapati's novel appears in a different garb in Kalindi Charan Panigrahi's Matira Manisha (Oriya: 1931) as Hari Mishra, a shrewd Brahmin who becomes the chairman of the village panchayat. Hari Mishra tries to divide a happy and prosperous joint-family and to destroy the integrity of the village life for his selfish end but finds that people are becoming conscious of their rights. Their revolutionary protest eventually endangers his safety. It is as if Hari Mishra escapes from the world of Matira Manisha into the safer and more profitable world of

tribal Orissa as dipicted in Paraja. And then appears Ramachandra Bishoi in Gopinath Mohanty's Paraja. Here he serves as the middleman, establishing link between the tribal people and the revenue inspectors appointed by the government. Thus the predatory mediator between the market economy of the capitalist world and the pre-monetary values of the self-sufficient tribal village turns out to be a recurring presence in Oriya fiction.

As we have seen earlier, the advance of the commercial frontier into a relatively simple, self sufficient tribal economy was inaugurated by British colonialism. As a result tribals had to depend on the non-tribals who are basically exploitative by nature. In this connection Bikram Nanda writes:

> "The steady decline of the self-sufficiency of tribal producers increased the dependence of the tribals on the non-tribals. These non-tribals men and women who were peddlers in the highlands considered themselves "higher" in social status than the highland dwellers. This group of higher status Hindu men and women found an intermediary place between the product and consumption in the highlands. In years of bad harvest and during months of scarcity, the prices of grain were

> extraordinarily high and the tribals faced hardships in meeting their requirements of subsistence. This resulted in wide spread tribal indebtness in the highlands....."[15]

In Paraja market value is penetrating into a world where no markets existed. In the very beginning of the novel we find the adhikari, an outsider as well as a government agent imposing a fine of eighty rupees on Sukru Jani for whom the amount is exorbitant. Sukru then runs to Ramachandra Bishoi, the moneylender who eventually succeeds in keeping Sukru as his goti. Later Sukru's two sons, Mandia and Tikra also remain as gotis under the same moneylender. Sukru also mortgages his land which is never returned by the Sahukar. Thus the intrusion of money into a non-monetary society slowly destroyed a peaceful and happy family. There are some characters in the novel who in the beginning resist the market value system. Jili and Bili, daughters of Sukru jani resisted tooth and nail the proposals of the forest guard, a bureaucrat, and the first ever representative of the outside world to enter into the tribal world in the novel. But they are so helpless in the face of a value system that was engulfing their society, they are so helpless that they had to play the roles of concubines to the road-contractor and later Bili had to elope with the

moneylender Ramachandra Bishoi.

We also see, there is a progressive loss of individual liberty due to the market value system. Bishoi is purely a moneylender and not a zamindar like Mangaraj in Chhamana Athaguntha. He lends money to the needy people and turns them to bonded labourers, a process of which Sukru and his two sons Mandia and Tikra are victims. Freedom becomes a commodity and only money can give them freedom. The situation is something different in Hardy's The Woodlanders . In The Woodlanders Giles loses his piece of land but becomes an independent labourer. In England the landless people were free to sell their labour because the Industrial Revolution had opened up other opportunities of employmement. But in a predominantly agrarian Indian society land is often the only source of living and that is why it is imbued with so much emotion in our culture. The characters in Paraja waited for a long time for their piece of land and in the end out of frustration and disappointment they killed the moneylender.

The killing of the moneylender in Paraja is a clear instance of tribal resistance. It shows that Mohanty's description of tribal world is not purely romantic, nor is it mainly a nostalgic evocation of

pristine innocence. A comparison of the world of Paraja with Bhagabat Panigrahi's Oriya short story Shikara (1936) will bring this point out clearly. In Shikara Ghinua, a Santal hunter is so innocent that after killing Govinda Sardar - an oppressor very much like Ramachandra Bishoi - waits for the reward which he thinks he will receive from court for a brave and socially useful act. Instead of a reward he receives a death sentence. In Paraja on the other hand the tribal people know that the killing of Ramachandra Bishoi, although morally right is nevertheless a criminal act. They are aware of the legal norms and they go to the police station to surrender themselves and await punishment.

The tribal world has now been sucked into the administrative network of bureaucracy, jurisprudence and penal system. But the court and the police station in Paraja are crucial sites of corruption and exploitation. That is why tribal people shudder at the very mention of words sach as `law courts'. Mohanty describes the tribals attitude to courts in the following words:

> "They had seen from a distance the world of law courts, packed with buzzing crowds of clerks, peons, policemen, and lawyers carrying thick books under their arms, and it was a nightmare world for them. In the court

there was always someone growling at you: `What are you doing there'; `Who asked you to come in'? `Who is that smoking ? `Stop that noise! And people ask you not only your name but also your father's name and the name of his father and his father, back to the fourteen generation, and everything that was spoken was written down in the books. The tribesmen lived in terror of the court, and the stories they heard only added to their fear".[16]

The alienation of the people from the system that administers them justice arises out of the superimposed nature of the judicial system. It has not evolved indigenously, it is a graft from above, and it is meant to intimidate and mystify rather than help and redress genuine grievances. The court is a terror not only to the tribals but also to the non-tribals, especially to the common men of the villages who are also uneducated like the tribals and are terrified of the magic potency of the written word on which the legal system rests.[17] Another novel by Mohanty - Matimatala, which is an epic of Orissa village life tells us how the common people perceive the law court and its complexities:

"So many incidents occur in the village, it is not possible to go to the court for each and everything. The experienced villager feels odd and afraid at the very mention of the word. It is said that entering the court is like the outbreak of cholera.....".[18]

The tribal's fear of the court, the prison or any government official comes out of incomprehension. Anything unknown is mysterious and terrifying for a tribesman. Sukru implicitly attributes magic power. to these administrative agency. He addresses the court in the same way he addresses the sky and Dharmu, his God, the Just One. The literate people represented by the revenue and excise officials, the magistrate, the thanababu and also the Sahukar in the novel, as a class exploit the innocent and unlettered tribesmen. Sukru is intimidated and threatened by this literate world:

"Sukru Jani stood like a criminal in the dock and when he saw the officials writing, he felt as if the point of knife was being dragged across his heart; for he had the tribesman's instinctive dread of writings made on paper. He also heard them speak to each other in some dialect which no tribesman

could understand and this added to his terror". [19]

The tribal's culture is based on orality. They never maintain any records or any written document. Whatever deal they finalise, it is only through verbal agreement. That is why the cunning Sahukar can swindle them very easily since there is no written evidence available to them.

Mohanty presents a tribal world as an uncorrupted paradise before the outside forces began to enter it and subvert its values. In one way this is an over-simplification, a kind of stereotyping that is not unknown in literature, that constructs a binary opposition between good and evil or the natural and artificial to polarise two communities and two cultures. In Bengali literature [for example, Aranyara Din Ratri :1960 by Sunil Gangopadhyay] is replete with texts where Santal tribe is imbued with qualities of simplicity, honesty, robust health and enjoyment of life to provide a counterpoint to the decadent urban Bengali. Even in Premchand's Godan a tribal woman is introduced into the text merely to highlight her vigour, vitality and spontaneity in opposition to the fragile debility of the urban woman. The tribals thus have had a tradition of being represented as "the other" in Indian literature.

Gopinath Mohanty cannot however be accused of total romanticization because he knows the tribal world far too well to realise that not everyone in a tribe is the repository of positive values. There are pimps like Kau Paraja and Madhu Ghasi who emotionally and sentimentally exploit their victims. Even the lumpen characters in the text - Barik, Dhepu Chalan, Faul Domb, Chambru Domb, Shama Paraja, Rami, etc. are portrayed realistically and their petty corrupt ways are exposed. Thus we see that within the tribal community also a man is being exploited by his fellow man.

There is a controversy in the sociological and anthropological thinking on tribals about the degree to which their cultural autonomy can remain inviolate in today's world. Whether the changes brought in through development are undesirable because they upset the ecological balance of their lives is an issue on which endless debate is possible. The unspoken message of Gopinath Mohanty's Paraja is that the intrusion of outside forces can only bring in ruin and devastation to these children of nature. This is not a theoretical or scientific position, but an emotional view based on the author's compassion for the tribes. This romantic notion ignores the dimension of change that is inevitable in any living society. Instead of thinking of an evolving

society where the tribals can be accommodated along with the non-tribals, Mohanty dreams of a world where the Paraja's life can be presented in a museum - like stasis. While the reader is touched by the author's empathy for the predicament of the tribes when confronted with alien values, there remains a doubt whether the implied vision of an unchanging continuity of tribal culture is at all a desirable or possible in our complex and competitive world today.

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10. Gopinath Mohanty, Paraja op. cit. p. 5.

11. Ibid., p. 54.

12. Ibid., p. 104

13. Ibid., pp 121-2.

14. B.N. Nanda, The Demise of Domestic Community in Highland in Orissa, Occasional Paper presented in Teen Murti Library, New Delhi (1989) pp. 21-2.

15. ----do---- Towards a Social History of Highland Orissa, Occasional Paper presented in Teen Murti Library, New Delhi (1989) pp. 35-6.

16. Gopinath Mohanty, op. cit. p. 339.

17. It is interesting to note here the point made by Jasper Griffin about Virgil's impact on written culture : "Grammar was learned out of Virgil's text, and the poet became the many minds more or less identified with grammar itself..... For a barely literate age it was natural to connect literacy with

uncanny power. `Grammar´ shaded into "grammarge", a word for magic (`glamour´, another word derived from `grammar´, had originally the same meaning). See Jasper Griffien, Virgil (Past Masters), OUP, Oxford (1986) p. 108

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CONCLUSION

= I =

In this dissertation, I have attempted to read three novels in detail in order to analyse the dynamics of conflicting pressures in various situations within the hierarchical culture of oppression in our country. The three texts were written within one decade about half a century ago, and they seem to have captured in essence, and in a paradigmatic manner the exploitative human situations that are not unknown to us even today. Apart from the untouchables, the poor peasants and the tribals who are suppressed and marginalised in the stratified Hindu society, there is yet another class of humanity which has been systematically exploited: women. Class exploitation and social and cultural oppression by gender, caste and ethnicity often overlap and actually reinforce each other. That gender hierarchy is embedded in other socio-economic hierarchies can be seen in all the three texts discussed so far: Untouchable, Godan and Paraja. In the conclusion I shall briefly look at a short story by Mahasweta Debi written in a more recent time, in which the various strands of politics, economics, class, ethnicity and gender fuse together in an explosive

manner.

While gender oppression can be seen as a universal phenomenon, the existential experience of Indian women has a different sociological, religious and historical parameter. The treatment of women in India varies even from region to region and from community to community because the situation of women is determined by many factors, some of them invisible, like tradition or convention. The concept of the female in Hinduism is based upon an inherent duality: on the one hand, the woman is perceived as fertile, benevolent, the nurturer and the bestower; on the other, she is seen as aggressive, malevolent, as the destroyer.

Out of this ambivalence several kinds of tensions are generated. Although the specific situation of a particular woman is determined by her exact location in history, her economic situation, her marital status, etc. the fact that women have to suffer unequal treatment is by and large true in all classes and castes of our society. If the higher caste/class women themselves are subject to gender oppression, the women who come from the less privileged sections are doubly vulnerable. Mahasweta Debi's short story Draupadi, (originally written in Bengali in the Seventies), which has a poor tribal widow

as its central character, highlights an extreme example of such oppression.

= II =

The story is set against the background of the Naxalbari peasant movements of the 1960s that took place in the northern part of West Bengal. "The target of these movements" as Gayatri Spivak writes in the translator's foreword to the story, "was the long-established oppression of the landless peasantry and itinerant farm worker, sustained through an unofficial government-landlord collusion that too easily circumvented the law".[1] In the background of the story is the guerrilla-style insurgency which the armed police were able to suppress with exceptional severity, destroying the rebellious sections of the rural population, many of whom were tribals.

In the story, among many Naxalites Dulna and Dopdi, a Santal couple are the principal suspects on the police list, accused of the murder of the local landlord Surja Sahu and his son. Both Dulna and Dopdi are on the run but later Dulna, while he was drinking water at a village pond, is shot dead by the police. His body is left to rot in the open, in the hope that Dopdi or her comrades would come to collect the body and give it a

decent burial. But nobody turns up.

The search for Dopdi is intensified with a price of rupees two hundred on her head. Dopdi receives good support from her comrades and she knows that in an emergency, she has to surrender to the police and face the situation without divulging any names or any information about her comrades. That is why Dopdi runs through the deep forests, barefoot, trying to escape from her pursuers but she is cornered and arrested by the army. Senanayak, the chief army officer locks her up in a cell. At night she is subjected to severe questioning, and with hands and feet tied to a post she is sexually assaulted by not less than six to seven soldiers.

Next morning Senanayak wants to interview Dopdi in his office and orders his men to fetch her and present her before him. A defiant Dopdi tears off the rags that still cling to her body, shreds them into ribbons and throws them away. The policemen try to cover her nakedness and control her anger but do not succeed. Pushing the police out of her way, Dopdi in her stark nakedness, confronts Senanayak, boldly walking forward to meet him, directly, literally face to face. For the first time in his life Senanayak is totally out of his wits, thoroughly confused and madly bewildered. He is

speechless and stunned by this unexpected non-violent encounter.

= III =

Dopdi is the protagonist of the story. Mahasweta Debi uses two versions for her name: Draupadi and Dopdi. While the former name is directly linked with the great Indian epic the Mahabharata the latter is a tribal way of pronouncing the name. Actually Draupadi is a name given to Dopdi by her mistress, the wife of Surja Sahu, the moneylender. This shows that how the Hindu culture is dominating the tribal world and her very name is a superimposition of another culture on her daily existence. While examining Gopinath Mohanty's Paraja we have seen other examples of the invasion of tribal culture by the so called mainstream culture and the hegemonic role it plays on the lives of the tribal people.

Feminist critics have seen Mahasweta's Dopdi and Mahabharata's Draupadi - both as the victims of the patriarchal and feudal society, the argument being that while Draupadi had to marry five brothers in a polyandrous union for which her consent was not sought. Dopdi is placed by Mahasweta first in a "comradely activist, monogamous marriage and then in a situation of

multiple rape".[2] Asha Damle observes:

> "With a conscious and deliberate decision to save Draupadi from the predicament Kunti herself had to suffer, she engaged Draupadi in a polyandrous act, flouting all traditional norms, and the mores set by the elders in the society. In Mahasweta's Draupadi we meet the person who has successfully met this challenge, in a new age and in a new incarnation".[3]

Pratibha Ray, an Oriya writer who has written a novel Yajnaseni (1984) based on the representation of Draupadi in the Mahabharata writes:

> "Krishna, Vasudev and Kunti conspired to make her (Draupadi) marry all the Pandava brothers, in order to keep them united; to prevent the Pandavas from envying a brother for marrying the extremely attractive Draupadi, thus protecting the `Aryabrata' from `adharma'. She having already given her heart to Arjuna the man who had won her hand, took up the challenge. She actively participated in the politics of the time. She fought not just for women but for all human beings".[4]

Like the Draupadi of the epic, Mahasweta's Dopdi also actively engaged in the politics of her time. She participates in a movement along with her husband fighting for their basic rights. They are bonded labourers under Surja Sahu, the landowner and moneylender. The primary necessities of life such as water was not available to them nor were they allowed to draw water from the well meant for the upper castes because they were treated as untouchables. The anger and frustration accumulated over the years had forced the tribals to kill the moneylender. The Santal tribesman attacking the moneylender has a parallel in Gopinath Mohanty's Paraja.

The murder of the moneylender led to the deployment of army[5] under Senanayak, an upper caste Hindu to conduct a successful operation and to arrest the culprits: Dulna and Dopdi among them. In the government's opinion the Naxalites, the tribals, and the scheduled castes - all are of the same kind, a constant threat to the stability of the establishment. In the operation Dulna is shot dead, and Dopdi is arrested. She is interrogated by Senanayak for hours together. She is forced to reveal all the information about her comrades under the barbaric torture inflicted on her including multiple rape.

Unlike the Draupadi of the Mahabharata Dopdi had no divine help to rescue her from this brutal and inhuman treatment. Condemning the crime meted to a poor and helpless woman like Dopdi, Damle writes:

> "The brave soldiers rape Draupadi when she is tied to a post. Such a terrible shame for humanity.....The patriarchal culture loses its bearings when there is a woman in question her sexuality is the only thing that counts".[6]

Dopdi is not the only tribal woman in Indian literature to suffer for her poor socio-economic conditions, but in fiction we find several examples of such lower caste characters who are either molested or raped by the privileged male of Hindu society. In our previous chapters we have seen in Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable the attempted molestation of Sohini by the Brahmin priest; in Sivrama Karanth's Chomanadudi the physical assault on Belli by both the manager and supervisor of the Tea plant; and in Gopinath Mohanty's Paraja Jili, a tribal girl being used as a sex-machine by both the road-contractor and the moneylender, Ramachandra Bishoi. In the literature of the various Indian languages there must be numerous such examples reflecting an aspect of life widely prevalent in our culture. The nexus

between patriarchy and caste/ethnic hierarchy is not a theoretical construct, it is the stuff of ordinary lived experience.

It is a strange paradox that often in Indian literature, the body of the lower caste or the tribal woman has been romanticized, perceived as possessing a primal energy, vitality and spontaneity that the privileged women in seclusion have lost. Evidently most of these writers are male, and belong to the upper caste. Bengali literature is full of examples of Santal women with glistening black bodies swaying as they dance together, and Premchand's Godan uses a tribal woman briefly in one chapter to highlight her health and vigour and to contrast her with the wilted and wan city - bred Malati. In U.R. Anantha Murthy's novel Samskara (Kannada: 1965, trans A.K. Ramanujan, 1976) the author depicts Chandri and Belli as essentially sensual characters. He implicitly contrasts the lower caste women with the Brahmin women who are depicted as frigid with dwarfish braids and withered bodies. Anantha Murthy even goes to the extent of comparing the physical beauty of Belli with Kalidas's most famous heroine Shakuntala:

> "Which brahmin girl,- cheek sunken, breast withered, mouth stinking of lentil soup,- which brahmin girl was equal to Belli. Her

thighs are full... Not utterly black skinned, nor pale white, her body is the colour of the earth, fertile, ready for seed, warmed by an early sun" [7].

Although Sripati is not a particularly positive character in the novel, his sexual exploitation of Belli is almost condoned by the author because Sripati's own wife is unappetizing, and Belli is irresistible in her eroticism:

"her hair washed in warm water, wearing only a piece below her waist, naked above, waves of hair pouring over her back and face"[8].

Like Anantha Murthy, Gopinath Mohanty in his Oriya novel Harijan (1949) also takes an uncritical view of the molestation of a sweeper girl, Puni by Aghor, son of a rich contractor from the upper caste/class. Instead of reacting to the act negatively Mohanty writes that it was a sheer chance for an untouchable girl like Puni to surrender her body to a rich upper caste man. It is almost as if Puni is favoured by this act of Aghor. Refusing to look at it as an exploitation, Mohanty invests the act with naturalness and spontaneity. Puni thinks of the spontaneous union among birds, animals and insects and she tries to put not too much importance to

whatever happened to her. This is certainly a biased view by an upper caste-Hindu-male writer. Mohanty probably would not write so frivolously about a woman of his own community.

Compared to these writers Mahasweta Debi's handling of a woman's violations is startlingly different. At the end of her story `Draupadi' Senanayak cannot face the naked Dopdi. The brave chief commander of army collapses before an unarmed and helpless woman who is ravaged, wounded and naked. Mahasweta describes the encounter between Dopdi and Senanayak in a vivid manner:

> " Draupadi comes closer. Stands with her hand on her hip, laughs and says, The object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me?
>
> Where are her clothes?
>
> Won't put them on, sir. Tearing them.
>
> Draupadi's black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she beings laughing. Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation. What

is the use of clothes. You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, There is not a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, counter me - come on, counter me-".[9]

Asha Damle sees in Dopdi the incarnation of Goddess Kali as Dopdi fearlessly confronts Senanayak. Comparing the epic Draupadi and the tribal Dopdi, Damle writes:

" When Draupadi was dragged into the court by Duryodhan (sic),she was menstruating;those who were ready to unclothe her, couldn't care less. Dopdi is not menstruating; her vagina is bleeding because of the horrendous sexual molestations. She approaches Senanayak as she was, whose concern should it be? Who should feel the regrets? Dopdi has lost all sense of shame. She is not going to pray to Lord Krishna, and plead for his help. No god, no human, she knows can come to her rescue. She alone can and has to face the situation. She is a woman and she has the gumption of Kali.

She has to evoke that strength".[10]

As opposed to Damle's invocation of Kali, the popular image of the avenging or angry goddess, Mahasweta Debi resolutely refuses to deify any human endeavour. In her stories she deplores the divine images created around women by men as she thinks that such glorifying images have led to the exploitation of women. The mother image so valorised in Hindu society is based on the nurturing role of mother who gives milk - is subverted in another story by her called Stanadayini (Breast Giver) originally written in Bengali in the 1980s. Jashoda (her name evokes the memory of the mother of Krishna and the milk, cream and curd plentiful in her house) is a wet-nurse employed in a rich family. In order to keep her breast full of milk she has to constantly give birth to children. In the process she has twenty children of her own and feeds fifty more in her employer's extended family, combining her professional and biological roles through the exploitative use of her body. When at the end she dies of breast cancer alone in a hospital she is unattended by her own children, by the children who were brought up on her milk or by her husband. Her unclaimed body is disposed of by an untouchable attendant of the hospital. In a scathing irony Mahasweta Debi explodes the God image of the nurturing mother:

" Jashoda was God-manifest, others do, and did whatever she thought. Jashoda's death was also the death of God. When a mortal plays God here below, she is forgotten by all and she must always die alone".[11]

Mahasweta Debi as one of the most powerful writers in India today who is unflinching and relentless in exposing the points of intersection between the oppression of women in India and that of peasants, untouchables, tribals and other stigmatized groups. Her mode of writing on the one hand is vividly realistic and on the other hand allegorical. The making of the characters (Draupadi evoking the epic character and the trope of disrobing associated with her; Senanayak evoking military strength and the power of armed authority; Jashoda the mother of child Krishna and the ambience of the abundance of milk) all indicate this suggestive and resonant dimension of her apparently down-to-earth accounts of ordinary life.

Mahasweta Debi is also an activist in her personal life, fighting for the causes of the oppressed. There are various women's movements in the world today including many in our country who have been waging their battle for their basic rights and privileges. But this battle cannot be isolated from the battle from other kinds of

iniquities. Joan Kelly, a feminist critic writes that man-domination and man-made hierarchies are the causes for many kinds of subjugations. Unless these dominations and hierarchies are curbed, there is no end of gender oppression in particular and oppression in general. She writes:

> " It is my belief that we will live with these tensions for a long time. We will live with them perhaps as long as there is race, class, and sex oppression. For the truth that the women's movement encompasses all these positions. We need both separation and full social participation to liberate ourselves from our several forms of sex oppression, and sex oppression will not itself be overcome without liberation from all terms of domination and hierarchy".[12]

This study has attempted to illustrate Kelly's point in terms of India through examples from specific texts.

= IV =

Writing about the untouchables, pariahs, underdogs, the poverty-stricken peasants, the poor tribals and women - all downtroddens-the writers such as

Mulk Raj Anand, Premchand, Gopinath Mohanty and Mahasweta Debi have demonstrated different ugly faces of oppression singly or collectively.

Anand deals with the problem of untouchability in the Hindu society in his two novels. Untouchable and The Road (1961). Part of Anand's rational and scientific treatment of the subject may be the result of his extended stay in a relatively more egalitarian society like England. By caste he is Kshatriya and he falls into that Kshatriya tradition which since the days of Buddha, has been critical of the caste system. Anand is also a Marxist for whom class is the biggest determinant of oppression than caste. Anand dwells on this aspect of our social problem in his novel Coolie. Here Anand like any Marxist conceptualize caste relations in class terms which is probably not always possible in Indian circumstances. A sociologist like Gail Omvedt believes that caste in India cannot be equated with class since these two terms have different meaning and background. She writes:

> "low castes and especially the ex-untouchables (dalits) are, like women, a specially oppressed section.... their nature is different from that of the basic

> revolutionary class, the proletariat, and it is unscientific and misleading to speak of "caste and class" as parallel phenomena and parallel struggles in which the working class leads an "economic revolution". Now, because the new form of caste is conditioned by and under the dominance of capitalism, it can only be abolished by a social revolution under the leadership of the proletariat...".[13]

After writing on class oppression in Coolie, Anand returns to the subject of untouchability after thirty years in his novel The Road (1961). In his two novels Untouchable and The Road Anand is only concerned with the problems of caste oppression and he does not touch upon the religious and cultural dimensions of the untouchables' existence conveying an impression that untouchables in India do not have a subjectivity conditionaled by their religion or culture.

Premchand's novel Godan integrates more than one form of exploitative pattern: caste as well as class. While the landlord Rai Saheb and the capitalist Mr. Khanna are the upper class (also upper caste) people, Hori in that sense is a lower caste tenant. There is also a Brahmin moneylender, Datadin, whose oppression of Hori

is coloured by caste superiority. Apart from these central characters, there are a number of bureaucrats such as Revenue official, police etc. who time and again exploit Hori. Although Premchand belonged to the left-oriented Progressive Writers Movement, he makes his protagonist a tragic figure rather than a rebellious one. Max Adreth comments on such a situation thus:

> "When the social conflict is particularly acute and when the alternatives are far from clear (at least for the writers themeselves), literature inevitably reflects the tension by acquiring a tragic character".[14]

There are two figures in this novel - the rebellious Gobar and the tragic Hori, the distribution of the author's sympathy between the two points to the complexity of the novel and its justified endurance in the Hindi canon as a classic.

Mohanty was perhaps the first Indian writer to explore in a novel the tribal world in its different aspects. Apart from the conflict that goes on between the tribals and the non-tribals in his novels he also describes with sensitivity and accuracy the culture of the Paraja people which is very ancient and autonomous. But his message in almost all his tribal novels- "leave

the tribal alone" - makes one somewhat uneasy today. Mohanty does not seem to realise the fact that culture is a constant process of evolution but not stagnant, and cannot remain static like a museum exhibit.

The texts examined in this dissertation all in some way or other expose the double standards of society, highlighting oppressions of different kind. Ernst Fischer (1975) wrote that the purpose of art or literature cannot be merely aesthetic; there has to be a certain moral and social concern also.[15] Though writers cannot always actually bring about changes in society they can help in creating an awareness. Even when they cannot give a solution to the problems, they can diagnose the disease at least. Evaluating certain aspects of the British novel Avrom Fleishman writes on the function of literature thus:

> "Literature supplements not only the primary cultural world of language, belief, and behavior but second-level systems as well, which like it attempt to discourse of those discourses. As in the human sciences, which have been shown to operate by conceptual schemes tantamount to fictions, the role of literary functions is to locate us in our human world, to contrive for us a securer

> perch in reality by all the arts at its disposal. To determine how literature does this, by comparison with the fictions by which the human sciences confront reality, will help us toward the special virtue of fiction as a genre, toward its supplementary and invaluable contribution to the cultural world...".[16]

Thus, literature is not a historical record, it is an imaginaive representation of human experience and so long as it can make us uncomfortable about our smug existence by raising certain questions, it has contributed to the human cause.

Notes and References

1. Gayatri Spivak, The Other Worlds Methun, New York (1987) p. 181.

2. Ibid., p. 183.

3. Asha Damle, Draupadi, (an unpublished article: 1993) p. 1.

4. Pratibha Ray's interview to Times of India (3rd January 1993: New Delhi) p. 3.

5. Naxalbari movement was an armed militant struggle against the landowners and zamindars. As the police force was not sufficiently trained to curb this, army was used.

6. Asha Damle, op. cit. p. 7

7. U.R. Anantha Murthy, Samskara (1965) Tran. A.K. Ramanujan, OUP, Delhi (1990) p. 37.

8. Ibid., p. 40.

9. Mahasweta Debi, Draupadi (1970s),Tran. Gayatri Spivak, op. cit. p. 196.

10. Asha Damle, op. cit. p. 8.

11. Mahasweta Debi Stanadayini (Breast-Giver: 1980s) Tran. Gayatri Spivak in Subaltern Studies Vol. v. (ed) Ranjit Guha, OUP, Delhi (1987) p. 276.

12. Joan Kelly, Women, History and Theory (1984), The University of Chicago Press, London (1986) pp. 55-6.

13. Gail Omvedt, Land, Caste and Politics in Indian States (ed) Guild Publications, New Delhi (1982) p. 14.

14. Max Adereth, What is Literature Engageez in Marxists in Literature (ed) David Craig, Penguin Books, England (1975) p. 473.

15. Max Adereth analyses the function of art/literature giving reference to Ernst Fischer. To quote him: " A Marxist like Ernst Fischer states in The Necessity of Art that although literature cannot sidestep such issues as famine, poverty and ignorance, it would be wrong to expect a purely aesthetic attitude towards these problems, for it would amount to either an over-estimation or an under-estimation of the power of the art....p. 475.

16. Avom Fleishman, Fiction and the Ways of Knowing, University of Texas Press, Austin (1978) p. 13.

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