

**The End of Postcolonialism: Dalits, Adivasis and the Rhetoric of
“Antinationalism” in South Asian Literature**

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation argues that the literary representations by the Dalit (formerly known as Untouchables) and Adivasi (India's aboriginal peoples) writers dismantle the colonizer-colonized binary of the postcolonial literary theory and show that the nature and shape of Dalit and Adivasi subalternity are quite different from those produced by colonial relations. These voices, marginalized on account of caste and indigeneity, necessitate a consciousness that interrogates the dominant high caste and class elitist discourse and its systematic colonization of the literary/cultural and social lives of the Dalit and Adivasi subaltern. Going beyond the theoretical paradigm of postcolonialism, this project dissects the exclusionary singularity of Hindutva ideology and its strategy of building a "homogeneous" Hindu India. Interrogating the centuries old Brahminist practices and discourses that negate the possibilities of social and political solidarity across caste and other marks of identity: Touchables and Untouchables, Adivasis, and non-Adivasis, I suggest that the emergence of Dalit and Adivasi literatures destabilizes the hegemony of the elitist discourse and transcends the analyses of postcolonial theorists and subaltern historians who fail to acknowledge the centrality of caste in Indian society and its contradictions, inconsistencies and injustices inflicted upon the marginalized.

India's independence, although it "emancipated" the Hindu upper castes from British colonial rule, failed to address and rectify the systemic marginalization of Dalit, Adivasi, and tribal communities. These subaltern groups continued to be subjugated by postcolonial elites and excluded from the dominant nationalist discourse. The state's persistent suppression of the literary expressions of Dalit and Adivasi writers constitutes

a formidable impediment to the liberation struggles of Dalit and Adivasi communities. However, the contemporary South Asian literary landscape, as evidenced by the growing presence of Dalit and Adivasi writers, constitutes a strong challenge to the status quo. These texts serve to rupture and deconstruct the dominant Brahminic discourse that justifies the denial of humanity to Dalit and Adivasis and provide a trenchant critique of caste-based oppression that remains hidden in the writings of canonical (ergo high caste and class) postcolonial writers from South Asia.

Through the examination of texts by Dalit and Adivasi writers such as Bama, Sharan Kumar Limbale, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, and Temsula Ao, this dissertation explores how these writers challenge the dominant literary discourses and their failure to examine caste and its manifold ramifications in the social life of South Asian societies. Dalit and Adivasi literatures show that caste is not only a major determinant of the cultural/political identities since the advent of the so-called Aryan invasion in South Asia but also an instrument of suppression, dispossession, and displacement. I argue that Dalit and Adivasi literary imaginary breaks the “cultural dictatorship” of the dominant discourses and transgresses the limitations of the mainstream literary aesthetics, which is replete with Hindutva ideology and is devoid of low caste identified voices. I maintain that by evading caste’s permanent divisions and hereditary hierarchy the dominant discourses not only fail to understand caste as a major component in socio-political life of the people in South Asia but also deny its subterranean presence in postcolonial, nationalist, and feminist theoretical frameworks, problematically conflating it with the non-caste categories, such as, colonized, classed, and gendered subjects. My dissertation argues that Dalit and Adivasi literatures cannot be “engaged” within the current form of

postcolonial literary theory. Instead, it suggests the emergence of Dalit and Adivasi literatures and theory marks “the end of postcolonialism.”

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Historicizing Dalit and Adivasi Literatures

This dissertation posits that the emerging Dalit and Adivasi literatures in India present a major challenge to the provenance of postcolonial literary theory that has been the dominant theoretical framework for reading the literatures of the global south in the Western academy. Drawing on Dalit and Adivasi literary and theoretical writings, it proposes that the postcolonial literary criticism and postcolonial theoretical frameworks are not only inadequate to read Dalit and Adivasi literatures, but in fact, form a barrier to understanding them as they have been utterly oblivious to the social phenomenon of the caste system in South Asia. In fact, while postcolonial theory presented itself as a radical departure from the universalist models of literary interpretation in its attention to the processes and lasting effects of European colonization, in its obliviousness to the entrenched caste system in South Asian societies, it inadvertently aligned itself with the oppressors of Dalits and Adivasis through anointing them as “the subaltern,” and rendering Dalit and Adivasi struggles invisible and unnoticed.

I will begin my dissertation by demonstrating how and why the postcolonial theoretical model invisibilized Dalit and Adivasi agential subjects. Much has already been written on the binaristic methodology of postcolonial theory where “the colonizer” and “the colonized” are locked into two opposite positions, famously defined by Abdul Janmohamed as “the Manichean Allegory.” This binary is composed of black and white, victim and victimizer, with no shades of gray. Here “the colonizer” is the oppressor who

deprives “the colonized” of “his” language and culture, turning “him” into a Naipaul-esque mimic man. Postcolonial theory spends considerable time and effort on psychologizing the pathologies of this mimic man whose “mimicry,” according to Homi Bhabha is never adequate. A related strand of postcolonial theory’s preoccupation emerges from this “lack,” as it analyzes “the colonized” people’s attempt to achieve psychic wholeness through “recovering” and “reclaiming” their language and culture. The inherent tendency of such theorizations to promote a nationalist nativism was stringently criticized by some feminist critics for its glorification of “tradition,” but its denunciation by Dalit and Adivasi critics and writers on similar grounds remains unnoticed and unappreciated.

The postcolonial theoretical model is reinforced through a selection of literary works that fit into its analytical framework and thus lead to the creation of a feedback loop where the selection of the postcolonial literature curriculum is guided by its main foci. The texts that focus on themes of “writing back to the empire,” loss of culture and language, psychological malaise felt because of such loss, are selected for teaching and critical analysis. As a result, Dalit and Adivasi texts that portray the struggle of their protagonists against the social and political systems that deny them social, political, and financial equality in a post-independence postcolonial state and society rather than writing back to an absent colonizer do not get included in the postcolonial theoretical and/or curricular domains.

My dissertation proposes that a clean break with the binaristic postcolonial theory with its focus on colonizer/colonized relations is needed for the study of Dalit and Adivasi texts whose subject matter challenges the narrative of rulers of postcolonial

state's claims that "freedom" has been won, that the new Constitution gives equal rights to all the nation's citizens. Instead, Dalit and Adivasi narratives disrupt the normalized Brahminic order that underpins the social hierarchy of modern India which forces them to remain at the very bottom of society. This work examines how the dominant nationalist ideology, created by the high caste Hindu elites has marginalized and silenced Dalit and Adivasi voices for millennia so that they continue to remain unfree in a postcolonial India that claims to have "won" its freedom from the British colonizers. I propose that the Dalit and Adivasi narratives take an oppositional stance against the dominant literary and political discourses and create new narrative structures to represent their critiques of the hegemonic nationalism founded on Brahminism¹.

The Dalit and Adivasi critiques uncover the complacency of postcolonial theorists and subaltern historians who speak about the subaltern without acknowledging the centrality of the caste system which is the driving force behind the oppression of the people at the bottom of the social hierarchy. They demonstrate that the progressive posture of the postcolonial theorists, whether antiracist or feminist, is indeed oppressive if it colludes in excluding their claims for justice and equality.

¹ an ideology which envisions the Brahmins, so-called the highest castes in caste system in South Asia, as the custodians of state resources and maintainers of social order strictly based on the principle of purity and pollution and hereditary caste hierarchy. It constructs a religious/political structure and process that makes common people serve Brahminical interests. It refers "not to the people who comprise the Brahmin community but rather to the ideology of the Brahminic way of life" (see Aloysius' *Nationalism without a Nation in India*)

While Dalit and Adivasi literatures from India remain mostly unread and unknown in the Western academy, there is now a substantial corpus of Dalit and Adivasi writing being produced in India, in multiple vernacular languages as well as in English and English translations. This dissertation will focus on two Dalit and two Adivasi writers to examine their liberatory discourses and the strategies they employ to make their voices heard in the dominant literary domains. I have chosen to focus on the work of two prominent Dalit writers, namely Sharankumar Limbale, who writes in Marathi, and Bama, who writes in Tamil. The Adivasi writers I selected are Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, who belongs to the Santhal tribe and writes in English, and Temsula Ao who is from the Naga tribe and also writes in English. Choosing two male and two female writers reflects my attempt to being attentive to gender oppression overlaid on caste and class oppression. While Adivasi communities do not practice caste and are outside the caste system of Hinduism, nonetheless, the caste system discriminates against them. The works of writers chosen for detailed examination in my dissertation demonstrate the complex ways through which the culture infected by the caste system discriminates against both Dalits and Adivasis. They also prise open the inner conflicts of their characters and communities that result from living in a caste dominant social system. More specifically, while Limbale's *Hindu* portrays the casteist violence against Ambedkarite activists, it also laments the internal divisions, patriarchal mindset, and corruption of Dalit leadership. Bama's *Sangati* tells the stories of struggle of a community of Pariah (an untouchable caste) women who remain at the bottom of the Hindu caste system despite their conversion to Christianity. Bama, a Dalit Christian herself, makes a trenchant critique of Indian Christianity which has failed to cleanse itself

of the mores of Brahminism its followers inherited from the Hindu caste system.

Shekhar speaks about the Adivasi Santhali people of Jharkhand and their dispossession from their land and their loss of culture, whereas Ao speaks about the Adivasi Naga people in the northeast India and examines the Naga psyche after the failure of their independence movement to secede from the Indian state. Both Shekhar and Ao explore the ways in which Santhal and Naga identities are connected to their ancestral land.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will first examine, in some detail, the reasons why postcolonial theory has failed to engage with Dalit and Adivasi literatures and then situate my own methodology for the analysis and interpretation of the selected texts.

As I suggested in the opening paragraphs, while the postcolonial theory has been the framework for introducing and studying South Asian and other Third World literatures in the West, it has failed to pay attention to the hierarchies and injustices of South Asian societies that predate colonialism. It has failed because instead of noticing the erasures of these hierarchies, especially those of caste, in the writing of high caste and class South Asian writers, it constructed these privileged voices as the colonized subaltern, who struggled for his (mostly) country's independence against the white/western colonizer. What needed to be done, instead, is to examine the ways in which these privileged writers occupy their position as the colonized subjects and silence the voice which comes from the people at the bottom of caste/class hierarchies.

Postcolonial theory assumes a priori condition of colonial occupation and colonizer-colonized dialectics in its area of study. It engages only with the issues that emerge *after* the colonial control has ended, or with the issues that have some sort of relation with "colonization." It also projects a romanticized assumption of the colonized's

“break” with the colonizer. Though the direct colonial control has ended in most parts of the world, there are various factors such as culture, finance and trade, and educational and technological dependence which continue the link between the colonizer and the colonized. Therefore, the “break” with the colonizer is merely a romanticized assumption of the postcolonial discursive domain. What postcolonial theoretical framework constructs is a distinctly identified binary that presupposes exploiters and exploited in a specific political/geographical location and their more or less common experiences that emerge through the exploiter-exploited binary construction. Postcolonial theorists attempt to envelop the nature and condition of colonized people within the framework of some common experiences produced by colonizer-colonized relation in a broad universal spectrum, ignoring the fact that within every colonized country there are various heterogeneous, and hierarchized (as through caste in south Asia) ethnic groups, cultures, languages, political/geographical condition etc., and these conditions could produce entirely different experiences within a larger colonial geographical location. In one of the major postcolonial literary theory texts, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin define the area of postcolonial literature thus:

[T]he literatures of African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island countries, and Sri Lanka are all post-colonial literatures. The literature of the USA should also be placed in this category. Perhaps because of its current position power, and the neo-colonizing role it has played, its post-colonial nature has not been generally recognized. But its relationship with the

metropolitan centre as it evolved over the last two centuries has been paradigmatic for post-colonial literatures everywhere. What each of these literatures has in common beyond their special and distinctive regional characteristics is that they emerge in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre. It is this which makes them distinctively post-colonial. (Ashcroft et al. 2)

Arun Mukherjee ridicules the idea that “hundreds of thousands of texts being produced in far-flung corners of the world by people of different ethnicities, different religions, different histories and different linguistic backgrounds all shared the three common features” (*Postcolonialism: My Living* 17), i.e., “[t]he silencing, and marginalization of post-colonial voice by the imperial centre; the abrogation of this imperial centre within the text; and the active appropriation of language and culture of that centre” (Ashcroft et al. 82). Postcolonial theorists, thus, deny the uniqueness of human communities that emerges from their encounter with their lived environment through history and goes beyond their membership in a nation state. Stuart Hall suggests:

[T]hose deploying the concept must attend more carefully to its discriminations and specificities and/or establish more clearly at what level of abstraction the term is operating and how this avoids a spurious ‘universalisation’... it need not follow that all societies are ‘postcolonial’ in the same way and that in any case the ‘post-colonial’ does not operate on its own but ‘is in effect a construct internally differentiated by its intersections with other unfolding relations. (245)

Hall correctly identifies that the problem with the postcolonial theory is its production of a spurious ‘universalization’ which does not recognize that all ‘postcolonial’ societies may not operate in the same way and that their “postcolonial” may be “internally differentiated by its intersections with other unfolding relations.” In South Asia, for example, the “postcolonial” is deeply imbricated in caste/class relations, and any theoretical framework that ignores the workings of both class and caste, is deeply flawed. B.R. Ambedkar, for example, accused Marxist theory of ignoring caste when they saw everything through the lens of class relations. The postcolonial theorists, on the other hand, have ignored both caste and class, assuming that “the postcolonial condition” is the master key to understand all oppression.

Thus, the false universalism of the western literary framework that the postcolonial theorists want to challenge returns in a full circle in their universalization of the colonial/postcolonial experiences and their discursive practices. Although they claim to subject “the inability of European theory to deal adequately with the complexities and varied cultural provenance of post-colonial writing” to a “radical questioning,” through demonstrating how it emerges” from particular cultural traditions which are hidden by false notions of ‘the universal’ (Ashcroft et al. 11), they end up doing just the opposite when they pay no attention to the discriminatory value systems, enforced thousands of years ago by the Brahminic caste system and the Hindutva² doctrine in South Asian societies. Nor do we find any sustained examination by postcolonial theorists of the systemic othering of indigenous peoples in many postcolonial societies around the world.

² a political ideology which seeks to transform the country into a Hindu majoritarian state or “Hindu Rashtra.” (a detailed discussion will follow later in the chapter).

The constricted framework of postcolonial theory cannot address the questions that arise from the caste/class and race and gender related disparities. Postcolonial theory claims that by focusing on the intransigent, or “writing back” aspects of global south writers, it is bringing their critical perspectives about the western colonizers to the forefront from their marginalized position. The promise was fascinating. However, this theorization could not get into the layers of discriminations and injustices that are represented by the marginal voices that do not write about the colonial encounter but about the oppression suffered at the hands of higher caste and/or class. The postcolonial theoretical perspective which says that it is “concerned with the subsequent interaction between the culture of the colonial power, including its language, and the culture and traditions of colonized peoples” (Innes 2), limits itself to a conception of the “postcolonial” as symbiotically conjoined with the colonial, excluding a vast swath of lived realities of people currently living in postcolonial societies in South Asia. Not only does this framework ignore the historical/cultural conditions such as feudalism and Brahminism prior to the colonial rule, but also disregards how they continue to exist after the colonial era has come to an end.

In order to understand the diverse cultural/literary/material histories which exist outside the colonizer/colonized binary limitations, we need a different approach that goes beyond the postcolonial literary trajectory. The dominant postcolonial theoretical discourse continues to reproduce the discursive position that creates its own Other. Marginal discourses that emerge from the alternative standpoints need a different approach as these literary/cultural positions demand a more nuanced understanding of their historical, political, and cultural/literary conditions. Postcolonial theoretical tools are

inadequate to study the literature which is informed by the consciousness of its cultural/geographical/discursive marginalized position and is in opposition to the locally dominant centers. To locate the colonized in the singular subject position, thus, diminishes all other subject positions within “the colonized” and therefore forecloses the possibility to explore the complex social relations of power and disempowerment that are produced locally.

Judith Misrahi-Barak, K Satyanarayana and Nicole Thiara have pointed out how postcolonial theory, despite claiming to make space for the marginalized, has not done so:

The apparent interest in silenced and oppressed people in postcolonial studies sits uneasily with the relative marginalization of Dalit literature in this discipline. It is therefore important that postcolonial studies engage with this emerging field in order to remain relevant and avoid inadvertently contributing to the silencing of this important and radical literature. (1)

While it is encouraging to see this acknowledgement of the absence of attention to Dalit literature in postcolonial critical and theoretical approaches, my dissertation will argue that Dalit and Adivasi literatures cannot be “engaged” within the current form of postcolonial theory. It is for that reason that I see the emergence of Dalit and Adivasi literatures and theory as “the end of postcolonialism.” Dalit and Adivasi subjectivities cannot be easily accommodated within the limits of postcolonial literary and theoretical domain. Or, in other words, the “subaltern” of postcolonial theory is a fake subaltern. S/he is a high caste, privileged writer who can only represent the Dalit and Adivasi

subalterns through “a discourse of pity,” and not in their full humanity (A. P. Mukherjee, *Postcolonialism: My Living* 52).

A major weakness of some branches of postcolonial theory has been its uncritical valorization of nationalist struggles. Although the post-independence nationalist discourse claims to address the “people” and their historical/cultural conditions, it fails to understand the historical/cultural and religio-political implications of the institutions such as the caste system and its complex foundation as different from the institutions that were produced as the consequence of the colonial rule. The caste system is the “white elephant in the room” that the national, high caste elites of South Asia have continued to ignore. Caste is not only practised by the high caste Brahmins but also by the lower caste people because every caste has a certain privilege over the caste lower to it, except the ones which are at the very bottom. As Dalit sociologist, Gopal Guru puts it: “The Shudra/Ati-Shudra castes did not object to the discriminatory treatment that they received from the upper caste, because Brahminical hegemony also gave them a relative sense of social superiority over other caste groups which were immediately below them on scale of continuous hierarchy” (“Limits of the Organic Intellectual: A Gramscian Reading of Ambedkar” 89). The graded privilege over the lower castes is maintained because every caste is interested in enjoying their privilege over the castes lower to it. Arundhati Roy argues that “Brahminism makes it impossible to draw a clear line between victims and oppressors, even though the hierarchy of caste makes it more than clear that there are victims and oppressors. (The line between Touchables and Untouchables, for example, is dead clear). Brahminism precludes the possibility of social or political solidarity across caste line” (51). The dominant nationalist discourse defended the caste system as a

unifying force rather than a dividing one. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of post-independence India, like Gandhi, considers the caste system to be better than slavery and argues that there is freedom and equality within a caste: “Within each caste there was equality and a measure of freedom” (216). Thus, he completely ignores the inequalities and injustices across the caste lines. Instead of highlighting the permanent inequalities inherent in caste, the dominant discourse silences the voices which challenge the hypocrisy of the caste-based nationalist/Hindutva doctrine. Representations of the Dalit characters, Bakha in Mulk Raj Anand’s novel, *Untouchable* (1935) and Valutha in Arundhati Roy’s novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997), for instance, seriously undermine the Dalit agency and portray them “as they appear to the gaze of” (A. P. Mukherjee, *Postcolonialism: My Living* 141) the upper caste/class writers in which “a Dalit can never see his/her self-being reflected” (Jangam 68). The deliberate distortion of the cultures and discourses of the lower caste people and the denial of the pluralities further silence the subalterns and promote the homogenous subjectivity of the nationalist elites. The hegemonic control of discourse by the upper castes pushes the lower caste people, Adivasis and other minority groups out of the nationalist imaginary in the South Asian nationalist discourses. Partha Chatterjee suggests that the Indian nationalists were no different than the colonial power in their attitude to the lower castes, whom they saw in an essentialized way, as “the peasantry”:

In India, the colonial mind thought of Indian peasants as simple, ignorant, exploited by landlords, traders, and moneylenders, respectful of authority, grateful to those in power who cared for and protected them, but also volatile in temperament, superstitious and often fanatical, easily aroused by agitators and

troublemakers from among the Indian elite who wanted to use them for their narrow political designs. Indian nationalists, not surprisingly, shared similar assumptions. (*The Nation and Its Fragments* 158–59)

This strategy of the nationalist elites to objectify peasants and see peasantry to be acted upon, controlled, and appreciated within the respective state power denies not only the agency of the peasants but also their contribution to the anticolonial struggles and many other nationalist movements. However, Chatterjee also fails to acknowledge the caste-centered discrimination against the lower castes and Adivasis who come from the specific historical, cultural, and material conditions, and, therefore, have different experiences than that of the high caste people. Subsuming Dalits and Adivasis into other high caste/class peasantry undermines one of the major divides that caste creates among the people in South Asia.

The objectification and silencing of the marginalized people become a strategy in the narrative formation of the postcolonial nation-state, in which the voice of the Dalits, Adivasis and other minority people is muted. Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” asserts that the effort to represent the subalterns repeats the very silencing it aims to combat. She argues:

[T]he possibility of the intellectual is complicit in the persistent constitution of the Other as the Self 's shadow, a possibility of political practice for the intellectual would be to put the economic "under erasure", to see the economic factor as irreducible as it reinscribes the social text, even as it is erased, however imperfectly, when it claims to be the final determination or the transcendental signified” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 2197).

Spivak raises an important and interesting question about the representation of the subalterns by the intellectual's narrative constitution that deliberately reproduces the Other and elides the claim for the reconstitution of the Other self further. In other words, what postcolonial intellectual represents is not the subaltern subjectivity but his own diminished self. However, Spivak thinks that the subaltern studies group in the 1980s made a significant revision of history or the shift in the perspective, writing "history from below" and locating the agency in the subaltern. While Spivak notes that "politics of the people," could be an alternative domain with a coexistence of both the elites and the subalterns, she is equally critical about the possibility of subaltern representation in the privileged discursive spaces. She argues, "I cannot entirely endorse this insistence of determinate vigor and full autonomy, for practical historiographic exigencies will not allow such endorsements to privilege subaltern consciousness" ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 2201). Spivak points out that the elements in the texts of the subaltern group "warrant a reading of the project to retrieve the subaltern consciousness as the attempt to undo a massive historiographic metalepsis and "situate" the effect of the subject as subaltern" (*The Spivak Reader* 214). She believes that the subalternists were able to unravel the official Indian history by shifting its narrative. These alternative historiographical narratives pose some questions regarding the limitations of the historiographical representation of the subaltern and point towards a need of a more representational framework. However, the Subalternist historians did not choose to explore the active caste presence in the South Asian societies and the discrimination experienced by the Dalits, Adivasis and other minorities under the Brahminic world order.

While the Subaltern school had only spoken of “the peasantry” as “the subaltern,” in the usage of the postcolonial theorists, it soon got stretched to refer to “all” the people of a colonized country. Harish Trivedi, for example, conflates everyone including the high caste people with the subalterns when he speaks of the “formerly colonized, who have, for long, been suppressed into silence” and goes on to say that “the subalterns, the low and common folk, still cannot speak, they [westerns] most kindly speak for us” (189). Trivedi completely erases the caste presence in his definition of the subalterns and ignores the layers of caste discrimination that the lowest people, Dalits and Adivasis face in South Asia.

By using an unqualified term “subaltern” in their projects, the Subalternists, on the one hand, conflate the privileged high caste people with the marginalized lower castes, Dalits and Adivasis, and, on the other hand, erase the caste gap and its complex implications in the caste/class hierarchy within the “colonized” conditions. According to Ramnarayan S. Rawat and K. Satyanarayana, the Subalternists’ refusal to recognize the caste system as a major element in the formation of the unequal socio-cultural and class hierarchies in South Asia and putting the Brahmin peasant and the Dalit peasant in one broad “subaltern” category is a serious flaw in their analysis:

The subaltern peasant in most cases belonged to “lower-caste” groups (but not to the untouchable castes), who were culturally committed to forms of Hinduism and values of caste inequality. The subaltern was rarely either a Dalit peasant who was involved in struggles with other caste groups over land and segregation or a labourer in the cities dealing with exclusionary practices of workforce consisting primarily of people from “lower-caste” backgrounds. (14)

The deliberate exclusion of the Dalit peasant from the Subaltern scholarship is meaningful in the same way as their exclusion and erasure of Jotiba Phule, B.R. Ambedkar, E.V.M. Periyar and other writers who strongly fought and spoke for the subalterns in South Asia. What Subalternists willfully ignore is the ways in which the high caste domination has created a massive rupture among the South Asian societies and at the centre of this rupture is caste. They fail to recognize the ways in which Dalit and Adivasi narratives produce an alternative standpoint which recognizes the respectable presence of the subaltern who is suppressed by the high caste elites. The standpoint that contests the dominant ideology comes from the Dalit and Adivasi writers and produces an alternative discursive ground to represent the subjectivities of the truly subjugated Others. These kinds of alternative narratives, Bhabha argues:

attempt to intervene those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic ‘normality’ to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged histories, of nations, races, communities, peoples. They formulate their critical revisions around issues of cultural difference, social authority and political discrimination in order to reveal the antagonistic and ambivalent moment within the ‘rationalizations’ of modernity. (*The Location of Culture* 171)

Even though Bhabha does not pinpoint specifically the extent to which Dalit/Adivasi discourse intervenes in the dominant ideology, he seems to underline the importance of the marginal voices in the reconstruction of national identity. He recognizes that the dominant narratives overpower all other stories and dismiss their relevance in the nationalist discourses. A well-defined, stable national identity based on the norm, according to him, is a false idea. Bhabha calls for a collaborative approach to evoke the

“ambivalent margin of the nation-space” (“Introduction: Narrating the Nation” 4). He argues, “To reveal such a margin is, in the first instance, to contest claims to cultural supremacy, whether these are made from the 'old' post-imperialist metropolitan nations, or on behalf of the 'new' independent nations of the periphery” (“Introduction: Narrating the Nation” 4). Bhabha thinks that minority narratives are a substantial “intervention into those justifications of modernity — progress, homogeneity, cultural organicism, the deep nation, the long past — that rationalize the authoritarian, 'normalizing' tendencies within cultures in the name of the national interest or the ethnic prerogative” (“Introduction: Narrating the Nation” 4). Dalits and Adivasis have privileged perspectives on rethinking of national identities and make them more inclusive. Unfortunately, the narratives of the national identity are continually marginalized and silenced by the nationalist identity and are beyond the scope of high caste elite nationalist domain.

Bhabha’s idea of hegemonic normality which the nationalists safeguard and promote co-exists with the nationalist elites’ control of the ideological discourses and continued retention of the hegemonic power. Michel Foucault argues that truth is relative to power and the control of the state apparatuses. He observes that the truth “is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses (university, army, writing, media) . . . it is the issue of a whole political debate and social confrontation” (131–32). Power relations of the state apparatuses produce the hegemony of a certain ideology and the authority of a certain caste/class in the tactical arrangements of various state institutions. In this kind of power/knowledge dynamics of the state, the alternative voices produce an uneasy relationship with the hegemonic ideology of the dominant caste/class, and therefore,

these voices are marginalized and silenced. Nationalist literature, which is the voice of the dominant caste/class, therefore, is mediated, and can only serve the purpose of the dominant elites. In this literature's relation with power, there is no possibility of the representation of the Dalits/Adivasis in the contemporary South Asian nationalist narrative framework.

The nationalist discourses count on the British elitist historiography and its imitation of power politics and domination. Ranajit Guha argues that the objective of Indian elitist historiography was to:

uphold Indian nationalism as a phenomenal expression of the goodness of the native elite with the antagonistic aspect of their relation to the colonial regime made, against all evidence, to look larger than its collaborationist aspect, their role as promoters of the cause of the people than that as exploiters and oppressors, their altruism and self-abnegation than their scramble for the modicum of power and privilege granted by the rulers in order to make sure of their support for the Raj. (2)

Guha observes that the “politics of the people” or a parallel domain of the subaltern groups has been erased from the Indian historiography. The high caste elites who dominate the Indian institutions of governance “share the prejudice that the making of the Indian nation and the development of consciousness–nationalism–which confirmed this process were exclusively or predominantly elite achievements” (1). The failure of the Indian elites to speak for the nation and demarcate the existence of subaltern politics and identity demonstrate a significant gap in incorporating the distinctive experiences of the exploitation and the labour of the subaltern. Subaltern Studies group challenges the

contradiction of the Indian nationalist historiography and calls to recognize the co-existence of both domains—the subalterns and the elites—in the making of the Indian nationalism. However, it seriously lacks the desire to look at the voices coming from the Dalit/Adivasi writers who have built a strong literary/political discourse that subverts the high caste elite literary/cultural domain.

Though the Subaltern project was started with a mission of unfolding the subaltern subjectivity, or “writing history from below,” the Subaltern scholars have ignored the voices of many writers from the Dalit/Adivasi groups. For instance, B.R. Ambedkar, who is highly revered as the “Father” to his followers and greatest leader of the Dalits is deliberately erased from the subaltern discourses. Subaltern scholars’ ignorance of Ambedkar’s unprecedented study and critical analysis of not only the classical Sanskrit texts but also the western writers and texts seems to be a conscious choice. We can’t assume that the Subaltern scholars were not aware of Ambedkar who was at the centre of literary/political debate at a time when India was trying to define its national identity. A highly educated scholar/writer and the chairman of the Constituent Assembly, Ambedkar was not invisible to the “people.” Commenting on one of the major Subaltern writers’ text, Partha Chatterjee’s *Nation and its Fragments*, Sumit Sarkar argues:

There is not much interest in how women struggled with a patriarchal domination, that was, after all overwhelmingly indigenous in its structures. Even more surprisingly, the book tells the reader nothing about powerful anti-caste movements associated with Phule, Periyar, or Ambedkar. No book can be expected to cover everything, but silences of this magnitude are dangerous in

work that appears on the surface comprehensive enough to serve as a standard introduction to colonial India for non-specialists and newcomers, particularly, abroad. (96)

Why Ambedkar's literary/political discourse did not get space in the Subaltern scholarship is an interesting contradiction that indicates an implicit bias of the high caste elite scholars to evade the alternative standpoint. It is quite clear from Sarkar's critique that the Subalternists carefully chose to invisibilize the critiques of the mainstream elitist ideology and silence the voice that interrogated the foundation of the high caste elite discursive domain. Ambedkar scathingly critiqued the Hindu orthodoxy and its perpetual annihilation of lower castes people and challenged the "discourse that glorifies a Brahminic corpus of ancient texts while totally ignoring its hierarchization of human beings into touchables and untouchables" (A. P. Mukherjee, "B. R. Ambedkar, John Dewey, and the Meaning of Democracy" 345). He denounced Hinduism and condemned it, declaring it to be a "veritable chamber of horrors" (*What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables* 296). Ambedkar's body of work consistently argues for the subaltern voice and subjectivity, and their fair representation in the state institutions. But his massive body of work is completely unacknowledged in the discussions of Subaltern literary trajectory. Though the Subaltern discourse seems to have acknowledged the centrality of Hinduism and its role in creating a hegemonic nationalist discourse, it does not recognize the caste system at its center and ignores the scholars who speak against the perpetual subjugation of the lower caste people. Ambedkar dissected many of the Brahminic Sanskrit texts, which are thought to be the cause of an unmitigable divide between the high caste elites and the lower caste Others. Ambedkar's exploration of "the

absurdities and inequities propagated in the ancient Sanskrit texts of the Hindu law, the Vedas and the Shastras” (A. P. Mukherjee, “B. R. Ambedkar, John Dewey, and the Meaning of Democracy” 348) exposes the contradiction of the Brahminic society and its caste based religio-political dimension. Mukherjee observes that there is “no place inside the parameters of postcolonial theory for Dr. Ambedkar’s “resistance” against and “subversion” of Mahatma Gandhi’s and Indian National Congress’s agenda because it was not against “the colonizer” from Europe but against the overlords at home” (*Postcolonialism: My Living* 19). Ambedkar’s political/discursive fight is against the “enemy within” as Mukherjee observes. The dominant literary/political discourse cannot imagine and incorporate any stance against the glorified hero such as Gandhi and the Hindutva ideology. Neither the nationalist discourse nor the Subalternist project is comfortable in incorporating Ambedkar’s subversion of high caste elite’s “colonization” of the Dalits/Adivasis and other minority groups.

Dalit writers’ marked adherence to Ambedkar’s philosophy is considered to form the pre-text of all the contemporary Dalit literature. Despite Ambedkar’s vast body of writings and his immense influence, his works are not freely circulated. Upendra Baxi notes:

The Indian social science landscape has disarticulated Babasaheb Ambedkar by studious theoretical silence. Even on the eve of his birth centenary, we do not have a complete corpus of his writings. Comparisons are odious, but we have organized corpus of texts of Mahatma, Nehru, Rajendra Prasad, and Patel (to mention a few examples). But Ambedkar’s corpus has just begun to emerge and that too, on the initiative of the Government of Maharashtra. If the market for

knowledge is also operated on the laws of supply and demand, we have to ruefully conclude that Ambedkar's construction of the Hindu society, nationalist movement, and resurgent postcolonial India, are cognitive commodities for which there is not organized demand either from epistemic entrepreneurs or by cognitive consumers in India. (49)

In G. Aloysius' words, "Dr. Ambedkar was not merely a Mahar leader but a leader of all disadvantaged classes, with an articulate and alternative vision of society, nation and politics. Depressed classes of the subcontinent expected him to wrest for them an honourable space within the new polity" (*Nationalism without a Nation in India* 62). Most of Ambedkar's writing carries a strong political objective, a desire to dismantle a centuries-old structure that denies the possibilities of liberation of the Dalits, marking a historical beginning of not only a political movement but also a literary/cultural movement that could lead the Dalits to an honourable position as human beings.

However, Ambedkar's philosophy of liberation and equality is vehemently opposed by one of the main architects of the Indian independence movement, Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi stood against Ambedkar's proposal of uplifting lower caste people through equal representation and equal share of political rights. The anti-colonial struggle, which following Gandhi, symbolized freedom as "Ram Rajya," or the idealized rule of a medieval king, could not motivate the Dalits and Adivasis to fight against the British rulers as the upper caste conservative leaders were indifferent to their demands and most actively resisted them. Dalit intellectuals like Ambedkar and Phule criticized the idealization of "Ram Rajya" as it was based on the caste system. The Dalit and Adivasi leadership was therefore fiercely against the nationalist movement because they

saw it as further cementing the caste system. Gandhi openly and persistently supported the varna system and claimed it to be a unique gift to the world whereas Nehru, though he was influenced by the socialist movement and was in favour of the secular nation, perceived Brahminic world order to be a norm that cannot be challenged. Gandhi was for the reformation of the caste system, more importantly for the elimination of untouchability. Caste system for Gandhi was “a natural order of society,” which promoted control and discipline and “has saved Hinduism from disintegration” (480).

Braj Ranjan Mani points out:

He [Gandhi] was a bania more brahmanised than Brahmans; his world-view and life philosophy were moulded and shaped by the age-old brahmanic values and way of life. [...], he never gave up his basic belief in the brahmanic values and way of life. While winning friends and influencing people through his seductive rhetoric of truth, non-violence, God, sin and punishment, he never gave up his basic belief in the brahmanic fundamentalism which is evident from his constant evocation of varnashrama, ram-rajya and trusteeship—the three unmistakable status quoist concepts embedded in the traditional structure of hierarchy and exploitation—that represent his social, political and economic philosophies. (348)

Gandhi's is one of the pivotal voices in the making of the Indian nationalist imaginary and its central tenets. Gandhi's claim that caste system is “not based on inequality, there is no question of inferiority” (480) remains central for the nationalist thinkers/ideologues who subscribe to the unchangeability of caste dynamics. Gandhi believed, as Mukherjee argues, that:

the caste system and untouchability were distortions that could be purged from

Hinduism without discarding *chaturvarna*, which he believed to be a unique gift of India to world civilization. He felt that untouchables must not stop performing their hereditary functions because that is what the *varna* system asks of every Hindu. (“Introduction” XXVII)

Gandhi observes *chaturvarna* as the unique gift of India to the world whereas Ambedkar understands this as a weapon through which the untouchables are permanently subjugated. Ambedkar opines that Gandhi used the patronizing term, *harijan* (God’s people) in order perhaps to appease the untouchable people and continue keeping them within the Hindu fold. For Ambedkar, to call Untouchables, *harijan*, “is to invite pity from their tyrants by pointing out their helplessness and their dependent condition” (*Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches* 364). Not only Gandhi but also Nehru’s writing shies away from the caste discrimination and the injustice perpetrated upon the lower caste people. Nehru criticizes Gandhi’s fascination with *harijan* campaign as diversionary, because he thinks this “led to the diversion of the people’s attention from the objective of full independence to the mundane issue of upliftment of the Harijans” (Namboodiripad 492). However, Nehru feared that the abolition of caste system could end the social cohesion. He argues, “the break-up of a huge and long standing social organisation may well lead to a complete disruption of social life, resulting in absence of cohesion, mass suffering and the development on a vast scale of abnormalities in individual behaviour” (247). Gail Omvedt claims that though Nehru took the religious identity as ultimately irrelevant and believed class to be an ultimate reality “yet the broad framework of his thinking saw Brahminic Hinduism as the ‘national’ religion, setting the framework within which other traditions could be absorbed” (*Understanding Caste* 7).

Nehru believed that “it was natural for the old Brahminic faith to become the symbol again and again of nationalist revivals” (138). Gandhi and Nehru were not only the most powerful politicians in the Indian subcontinent who were to leave their political trademarks for a long time to come but also the interesting and important literary figures who were to shape the nationalist discourse in the postcolonial India. But “their nationalist discourse was innocent of any mention of the injustice or cruelty of the caste order” (Mani 26). They not only fail to acknowledge the lived realities of the lower caste people but also actively diverge and diffuse the agency of a vast number of people who were systematically pushed out of the religio-cultural centers, and the political and economic resources. Though Gandhi used vague religious interpretations in his religio/political engagement and Nehru utilized socialist and secular rhetoric, they were essentially disseminating the same idea that caste system must be a fundamental element of the Indian society and needs to be preserved. Mani further argues that “they used an anti-colonial ideology to put in a great nationalist show, full of democratic sound and fury, while actually promoting the brahmanical supremacy that informed their selective reading of Indian civilisation and culture” (26). Their socio-cultural reconstruction of the past and the nationalism predicated upon it was not fundamentally different from the earlier Hindu nationalist ideologues, such as V.D. Savarkar, M.S. Golwalkar and others.

The terrain of the contemporary South Asian mainstream literary/cultural epistemology sophisticatedly undergirds the assumption of the Hindu superiority and the purity of the “Aryan”³ people. According to Golwalkar, the “protection and propagation

³ According to Romila Thapar, “The Aryas developed Vedic Sanskrit as their ritual language. They were segregated from the Dasas through the instituting of caste. The upper-caste Hindus were taken as

of our national life-values, i.e., our *dharma* and *sanskriti*, have always been held in our historical tradition as the *raison d'être* of *swatantrata*" (391). Golwalkar translates *swa* in *swatantrata*, freedom, as "our genius," which can only be realized when the Indian people worship the classical tradition of the Brahminic world vision inscribed in the Sanskrit texts. He castigates all but the Hindus as traitors because he claims, anyone who "cherishes an extra-territorial loyalties, we call him a traitor [sic]" (392). What Golwalkar proposes is the Hindu nationalist idea coupled with the reimagination of the orthodox Brahminic tradition dating back to the Vedic time and beyond. More interesting is how Golwalkar exalts the "Aryan" people to the superior position diminishing the non-Aryan people as merely the "bipeds" in the same way as the European colonizers categorized the colonized as "barbarian," "uncivilized" people waiting to be civilized.⁴ For Golwalkar these bipeds, "Mlecchas," do not deserve any claim to the space and location they reside in, as he claims the non-Aryan people to be the outsiders. The core of Indian nationalist movement and the anti-colonial struggles led by Gandhi and Nehru rests in the assumption that India is the land of the Hindus. While both of them professed a belief in the diversity of India, their discourse betrayed their high caste Hindu moorings. While during Nehruvian era, secular values were at least given lip service, the new dispensation is openly hostile to minorities. It claims that India needs to be reconstructed as the holy place that protects the Hindus and denies the fundamental assumptions of the human rights and liberal democratic norms. One of the recent history-writing projects envisioned

biological, lineal descendants of the Aryans. The lower castes, untouchables and tribals were descended from the Dasas" (Thapar et al. 44).

⁴ See Prabhati Mukherjee's *Beyond the Four Varnas: The Untouchables in India*.

by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government testifies to the underlying dream of the upper caste elites to propagate the ancient tradition and denounce the identity and representation of the non-Aryan people:

The systematic rewriting of history is a critical component of Hindu nationalist ideology. Its guiding concept, *Hindutva* ("Hinduness") calls for India's former untouchables, Christians, and Muslims to be assimilated, expelled, or annihilated so that a Hindu majority nation is transformed into an exclusively Hindu nation. (Visweswaran et al. 103)

Critics claim that BJP through Narendra Modi's leadership plans the implementation of its design of a Hindutva nation through a majoritarian authority and continues "the implementation of a more unvarnished pro-corporate and pro-upper caste compound of policies than ever before, paired with the normalization of anti-minority rhetoric, routine assertions of imminent danger posed by internal as well as external enemies to the nation and a systematic deployment of false claims and partition facts" (Chatterji et al. 1). Nationalist narratives seem to be more than content glorifying the past and at the same time deliberately ignoring the counter narratives of the oppressed Others.

Golwalkar's framing of the "Aryan" people within the Brahminic religio-cultural tradition and as the bearer of the true Indian character sets a profoundly exclusive terrain for a pro-Hindutva nation vis-à-vis the Brahminic Sanskrit tradition and its "unquestionable" doctrine of varna/caste dynamics. The upper caste/class has been the ruling class/caste historically and continues to be so today. This ruling caste/class continued to colonize and hegemonize the lower castes people even when India was no longer under the British domination. The British colonizers did not disturb the caste

hierarchy which existed in India for centuries because the British rulers understood that they would be much benefitted if they could continue entertaining the caste division. The policy of non-interference of the British in the religio-cultural matters in a hierarchically organized and segmented society was enacted under the approval of the privileged upper caste elites at the cost of lower caste exclusion. Aloysius observes that “the upper caste . . . enjoyed an enormous expansion of power, status and privilege at the expense of the masses” (*Nationalism without a Nation in India* 104). For instance, Deccan Commissioner, in the course of administering justice, argued that “maintaining the hierarchical order would keep the subjects disunited and unable to combine against the British. An equalising policy would ultimately reduce British stability in his view” (qtd. in Aloysius, “Caste in and above History” 161). Therefore, the varna/caste dynamics that was in operation for centuries continued without question or interruption from the state during the British Raj.

While Golwalkar saw lower caste and non-Aryan people as the outsiders and suggested to dispel them from the nationalist imaginary, V.D Savarkar attempted to incorporate them within the idea of Hindutva. According to him:

Hindutva is not identical with what is vaguely indicated by the term Hinduism. By an “ism” it is generally meant a theory or a code more or less based on spiritual or religious dogma or system. But when we attempt to investigate into the essential significance of Hindutva we do not primarily – and certainly mainly – concern ourselves with any particular theocratic or religious dogma or creed. (4)

Savarkar differentiated Hindutva from the Hindu religion and envisioned a much larger Hindutva nation in which all Indians regardless of their caste, ethnic, or cultural

backgrounds were subsumed. Savarkar conceptualized Hindutva “as a unifying socio-cultural category. Hindutva has become the political ideological slogan of the present-day Hindu revivalists who affirm a Hindu India” (Sugirtharajah x). Golwalkar’s idea of “Aryan” people as the aboriginal people and the non-Aryan as the outsiders, and Savarkar’s idea of Hindutva nation, continue to resurface in the dominant Indian political as well as discursive domain. These narrow literary/political discourses have no space for the non-Aryan, i.e., Dalit and Adivasi people.

Neither the nationalist governments nor the nationalist discourses attempt to challenge the apparent Hindutva ideology that fortifies the upper caste ruling elites who have been forcefully attempting to demonize the oppositional stance of the Dalit and Adivasi voice and criminalize it as “antinationalist.” The contemporary South Asian nationalist discourse is but a continuation of the Hindutva arrogance that assumes no mingling with any “polluting” factors into its unquestionable “purity.” The Hindu nationalist ideologues explicitly demonstrated their stance against the lower caste, Adivasi, and minority people whereas Gandhi and Nehru used more subtle forms of political/literary discourses to reiterate and protect the uncompromising nature of Brahminic caste society.

We see that there are two forces in opposition to each other, the high caste elites and their Brahminic world view, and the lower caste, Adivasis and other minority groups and their world view. The Dalits’ voice is one of the strongest counter discourses that challenges the dominant ideology and seeks to establish a more just society. Gail Omvedt and Bharat Patankar argue that the Dalits’ relationship to the nationalist movement was “antagonistic.” They observe, “The dalit spokesmen were inclined to argue that “British

rule was preferable to Brahmin rule” and to look for any means—special representation, separate electorates, alliance with Muslims—that might prevent them from being swamped by caste Hindu nationalists” (417). The anti-colonial struggle led by Gandhi and Nehru not only did not get the cooperation of the Dalit and Adivasi leadership but was fiercely opposed by them. Gandhi famously told that the Depressed classes had to wait for their freedom as they were “slaves of slaves.” We see interesting similarities here between the American declaration of Independence against the British while holding on to the enslavement of black people by the whites. So, just as Frederick Douglass made fun of 4th of July, Periyar observed that “Indian Independence was nothing but a transfer of the power of rule of the nation from the British to the Brahmins and Baniyas” (Ramasamy 83) and asked his followers to mourn on the Indian Independence Day, 15th of August. The narratives which privilege the upper caste people as the Self and the lower castes people in the caste hierarchy—specially the Shudras, and the Dalits—as the Other, therefore cannot be considered encompassing and representative literature of South Asia.

The shift of power from the colonizer to the hands of the elite upper caste colonized Indians did not change anything for the lower caste people. The lower caste people further drifted apart from the nationalist domain and were silenced and suppressed through an agenda of “unity” and “homogenization.” T.K Oommen argues that “the project homogenization was mainly an effort to liquidate the identity of minority groups so that their claim for collective rights can be put in jeopardy and delegitimized” (121). The idea of a homogeneous nation state has to be created because the most important project of the nation state is to impose the idea of “uniform,” homogeneous” citizenship. By the rhetoric of a homogeneous nationalist approach the ruling caste/class attempted to

pacify the lower castes, minorities and non-Hindu people and delegitimize their various demands for rights and recognition. The existence of multiple nations within the Indian nation state is a threat to the ruling elite caste/class because these diverse nations continue to challenge the idea of homogeneity and unity of the Indian nation state. The idea of Indian nationalism, which was supposed to invent a unified nation at the wake of independence, “instead of giving birth to one national society, seems to have delivered a whole litter of communities divided from one another in terms of language, religion, region, and caste” (Aloysius, *Nationalism without a Nation in India* 2). The most serious is the exclusion and demonization of the writers who differ from the dominant discursive location and offer the alternative approaches to the understanding and interpretation of history and the contemporary world. The Modi government’s declaration of rewriting history project and its intolerant behaviour towards the Dalit/Adivasi writers/intellectuals further attests to an impending danger of the end to the possibilities of Dalit/Adivasi representation. There are many instances of state incarceration of the writers recently. For instance, Kancha Ilaiah, an OBC⁵ writer, was issued a “fatwa” for writing about centuries of upper-caste atrocities committed against the “Dalitbahujans,”⁶ in his book, *Post-Hindu India* (2009). Another book, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015) by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, an Adivasi writer, was banned by the Jharkhand state government on the charge of “misrepresenting” the Adivasi people. And Perumal Murugan had to go underground declaring himself dead because of the threats he received for his literary

⁵ Other Backward Castes (OBC), as per Indian constitution.

⁶ Ilaiah coined the term “Dalitbahujan” to make a distinction between the Dalits and other suppressed castes.

production. Many other writers/intellectuals have been continuously put under police scrutiny and their works have been confiscated and destroyed. This demonstrates how the state is directly and actively involved in branding all oppositional voices as “antinationalist” because, “those who oppose Modi are the nation’s enemies, and hence the people’s enemies” (Chatterjee, *I Am the People* 110). In this political/discursive disjuncture the alternative discursive domain is defined as the Other of the Hindutva forces and is constantly put under serious state control. The alternative imagination is forced to surrender to the pro-Hindutva ideology and to accept the idea of “unified,” “homogeneous” India. However, Dalit works demonstrate a strong departure from the Brahminic nationalist discourse and interrogate its centrality of caste that stands against the alternative forces in building a better society.

For the Dalit/Adivasi writers, the upper caste Brahminic normative discourse constitutes the narrative viewpoint that “reduces the lower caste people to socio-economic aggregates or types” (Nagaraj 219). The literary works produced by the upper caste writers portray the outsiders’ views, with emotions full of “pity, anger or melancholy” which D.R. Nagaraj calls the “emotionalist” writing that often misrepresents the Dalit value system. These works undermine the Dalit world and the Dalit subjectivity. In other words, Dalits become the object of aesthetic pleasure in the outsiders’ perspective whereas the Dalit writers invoke their lived experiences and challenge the structures of their emotions in their literary works. For Nagaraj, Dalit world view and value system cannot be represented by such “emotionalist” writing which appropriates and distorts what the Dalit world represents. Mukherjee argues that the upper caste/class writers represent the Dalits as the “tragic victims, defeated by the onslaught of injustices

perpetrated on them by upper-caste and-class Indians” (*Postcolonialism: My Living* 52). She calls this kind of writing “a discourse of pity,” which “attempts to change the reader’s heart by piling realistic details of Dalit characters’ suffering, thereby assuming that the only problem with the reader is lack of information about reality, and once the reader is informed of the horrific state of affairs, she or he will change” (*Postcolonialism: My Living* 52–53). Mukherjee points out that mainstream writers such as Mulk Raj Anand, Siaram Sharan Gupt and Rohinton Mistry are not interested in portraying the oppressive actions and the moral blindness of the privileged caste/class, and therefore are aligned with the nationalist ideology of, on the one hand, forcing an outsider’s gaze on Dalit life, and on the other, pushing the Dalits further down the margin by appropriating the Dalits as the objects of pity who are unable to confront and act for their equality and freedom. Subverting the condescending assumptions of the dominant literary practices, “Dalit literature has emerged as an oppositional voice, puncturing holes in the grand narratives of India’s heroic struggle against colonialism and its transformation into the “world’s largest democracy”” (A. P. Mukherjee, *Postcolonialism: My Living* 41). Dalit literary voice emerges from the hungry stomach to dismantle the “hidden apartheid”⁷ and its victimization of the Dalits.

Dalit writers confront the appropriation of Dalit characters in the high caste works. In 2004, members of Bharatiya Dalit Sahitya Akademi (Indian Dalit Literary Academy) burned Premchand’s novel *Rangbhumi* (1925) in Delhi. Premchand seems to have recognized class exploitation and the political, economic, and social problems in terms of class relation and its various dynamics in social/political inequality. He is

⁷ See Anand Teltumbde’s *The Persistence of Caste: The Khairlanji Murders and India’s Hidden Apartheid*.

considered “a progressive writer whose political sympathies lay with the poor and downtrodden” and his works are hailed as ground breaking for their “innovation in terms of modern Indian literature” (Gajarawala, *Untouchable Fictions* 5). What he does not seem to acknowledge is the condition of the lower caste people and their subjective identity based on the religio-political structure set forth by the varna/caste system. Premchand shows “sympathy” toward the exploited masses and expects the reader to understand their plight and change, manufacturing, what Mukherjee calls, the “discourse of pity.” The Dalit members of the Academy stood against a “circumscribed narrative arc of the Dalit figures,” and the “*charitrahara*n (character destruction) of Dalit characters” (qtd. in Gajarawala, *Untouchable Fictions* 8) by a novelist who is endowed with the title, “*Upanyas Samrat*” (Emperor among the Novelists). It is the objectification of the Dalit characters and the visceral discrimination against the lower caste people based on the caste hierarchy that the mainstream writer overlooked. For Laura Brueck, the burning of *Rangbhum*i is “a cultural performance . . . by Dalits to negotiate with a symbol of a discursive sphere that has always either spoken for them or ignored them completely” (3–4). This incident is a gesture that represents a broader call to contest the “discourse of pity” of the mainstream writers and claim Dalit subjectivity and Dalit consciousness as different from that of upper caste representation. Defending the burning of *Rangbhum*i, Sohanpal Sumankshar, the president of the Akademi, writes: “We have no opposition to Munshi Premchand or his creative works. We are rather opposed to his jaativadi-varnvadi [casteist-varnaist] perspective. There are poor Chamars, and poor Brahmins as well. But in Premchand’s work the poor Brahmin is worthy of respect and the poor Chamar is treated with scorn” (qtd. in Gajarawala, *Untouchable Fictions* 7).

The Indian nation fails to honour and acknowledge the identity of the suppressed lower caste people. Guru argues, “The modern nation vehemently asserts its geographical boundaries without dissolving the pernicious boundaries that exist between, for example, the main village and the Dalit *vadas* (quarters or neighbourhoods)” (“The Indian Nation in Its Egalitarian Conception” 34). The ghettoization of the Dalit communities and their segregation continuously challenge what the nationalist scholars claim as the idea of one nation. Ambedkar talks about the existence of apparently two nations in India: Puruskrit Bharat (privileged India) and Bahiskrit Bharat (ostracized India). For Ambedkar, Purushkrit Bharat represents the high caste people who are different from the Bahiskrit Bharat, the untouchables who are at the bottom of caste hierarchy. Ambedkar “proposed an alternative idea of the nation, which he called Prabuddha Bharat (enlightened and inclusive India).”⁸

The vision of Prabuddha Bharat stems from the idea of the annihilation of caste, which, for Ambedkar and many other Dalit and Dalit identified scholars, is understood as the starting point to initiate a journey to freedom and equality. Hira Singh argues that “[t]he annihilation of caste and caste inequality is contingent on the annihilation of the unequal social relations of production restricting Dalits’ access to the means of production and the means of their subsistence, political power and cultural resources, including education” (112). The point of Dalits’ equal access to the various resources of production seems to be important for equality and freedom. However, Teltumbde’s

⁸ Gopal Guru discusses about it in “The Indian Nation in Its Egalitarian Concept” 34)

reading of Khairlanji massacre⁹ demonstrates that the assumptions of annihilation of caste based on the Dalits' access to economic and political resources are false.¹⁰ Caste has been constructed as an all-pervading, timeless phenomenon, "an unchanging ideal that precedes human history and stands outside it" (Inden 73). The dominant discourse that perpetuates the social order based on caste/varna system and glorifies the orthodox Brahminic tradition maintains that caste, as a prehistoric ideal, needs to be retained in order to sustain the unique South Asian culture. Those who followed the Hindutva ideology propagated Hindutva using it as a context to transform a religious consciousness into a political consciousness. The nationalist idea that emerged from the Hindu religious centrality was considered as "a great unifying force—an accurate reflection of the objective condition and contradictions—colonial exploitation—that was central to the corporate life of society at large" (Aloysius, *Nationalism without a Nation in India* 123). Perhaps the unifying force that drove the masses for the liberation movement derailed after the British Raj ended, or perhaps as Aloysius argues, behind that unifying force was a lie that purported to serve the upper caste elites who claimed the ownership of the independence, or rather monopolized it in relation to their caste/class interest. For Aloysius, the anti-imperial nationalism was a 'deception' and 'a conscious lie' as borne

⁹ On 29 September 2006 the entire family of Bahaiyalal Bhotmange was lynched to death—including his wife, daughter and two sons. Detailed reading of this is in Ananda Teltumbde's *Persistence of Caste: Khairlanji Murders and India's Hidden Apartheid*.

¹⁰ For further exploration see "Exploding the Myths" in *Persistence of Caste: Khairlanji Murders and India's Hidden Apartheid*.

out by the middle classes' collaboration, and even collusion, with the colonial state at different levels (*Nationalism without a Nation in India* 124). At the same time, the nationalist ideology was used as a convenient tool for the "unprincipled pursuit of economic and political advantage on the part of the different elite groups [. . .] in response to and essentially determined by the imperial initiatives" (*Nationalism without a Nation in India* 123–24). The lower caste people are constantly treated as the dupes for the vested economic and political interest by both the nationalists and the colonialists. In this systematic marginalization of the lower caste people, the lower caste scholars/writers began to redefine the Indian historiography, particularly, after the reform movement initiated by Jotiba Phule¹¹. Phule attacked the Brahminic religious authority as vicious and hostile towards equality and freedom for the lower caste people. Mahesh Gavaskar compares Phule with Ambedkar in creating a discourse that "draws attention to the fact that just as India went through a phase of British colonialism, it had previously passed, as at various stages of its history, through 'Brahmanical colonialism' and that British colonialism inadvertently made available certain normative and cognitive tools with which to fight Brahmanical colonialism" (91). Phule felt that there was a similarity in the oppression of lower caste and the untouchable peoples that was justified by the unchanging and unquestionable religious scriptures of Hinduism and that of American slaves who were denied their human rights through both Biblical and legal justifications. Phule attempted to subvert the Brahminic supremacy because he believed Brahminic ideology was the cause of the degradation of the lower caste people, particularly the

¹¹ Phule would be categorized as OBC in today's terminology, although this category was not there in Phule's time. He was of the mali (gardener) caste.

Shudras and *Atishudras*. Phule's idea of nationalism departs drastically from the ideology of Indian nationalism as envisioned by the dominant upper caste elites. Phule's version of nationalism centres around the location of the lower caste masses. Phule "propounded the theory of the Aryan invasion as the source of oppression" (Omvedt, *Understanding Caste* 99) of the lower caste Indians as a rebuttal of the upper castes' claims that India was the original homeland of the Aryans and that they were of Aryan stock. Gail Omvedt believes that the Aryan invasion theory¹² "is fallacious as well as a form of inverted racism; there is no evidence that the Aryans were responsible for destroying the Indus valley civilisation, and tracing the caste system solely to events of conquest is inadequate" (*Understanding Caste* 99). The Dalit anti-Aryanism confronts the privileging of the Aryan upper caste identity, the Vedic assumption, "the pride in being 'white' in opposition to 'black,' [and] the continual veiled forms of upper-caste arrogance" (Omvedt, *Understanding Caste* 99), which continue to hold the dominant position in the Indian nationalist imaginary. All of these, as per Omvedt, make it inevitable that the angry Dalit-shudra masses throwback "the weapon of racial and ethnic identity, and ask, 'who was the first invader? Who was the first outsider?'" (*Understanding Caste* 99). The question of indigeneity and the nationalist idea attached to it in South Asia is fraught with competing theories and assumptions, and therefore to examine them only from the high caste nationalist lens is inadequate.

Aijaz Ahmad questions the very category of nationalist literature, which homogenizes a heterogenous archive. It first brings "diverse kinds of public aspirations under the unitary insignia of 'nationalism' and then . . . designates this nationalism as the

¹² See Romila Thapar's "Theory of Aryan Race in India: History and Politics".

determinate and epochal ideology for cultural productions” (243). The condensation of the existing diverse cultural conditions and discrete historical situations into the nationalist literature by the dominant elites not only reduces the possibility of representation of various literary/cultural expressions but also obliterates the historical presence and the contemporary discursive/political/cultural location of the marginalized communities. Literary/cultural productions go beyond the boundaries set by a certain ideological reference, or the state mechanism, and remain outside the “unified” narrative of the nationalist literary/cultural framework. The premise of the dominant Indian literary and cultural discourse is governed by the privileged Brahminical ideology and its positioning of the Indian historiography under the rubric of Brahminic cultural tradition, in which the other discursive practices and cultural heritages are either demonized or silenced. The consistent and the systematic attempts of reconstructing a Hinduized version of nationalism seriously excludes the other versions of nationalism, those which question the Hindutva establishment or attempt to reinterpret the Hinduized nationalist idea as a narrowly constructed hegemonic upper caste territory where caste status decides which side of the spectrum one falls into. More importantly, the propagation of the hegemonic master Sanskrit texts and the Brahminic social world order manufacture a kind of knowledge that delegitimizes alternative knowledges of those subjugated by Brahminism. Dalit literature challenges the hegemony of the upper caste discourses and their anti-humanism and thus has been deemed anti-nationalist by some of the Hindutva ideologues.

Dalit literary voice interrogates the Indian mainstream literary establishment by demonstrating the failure of the independent India in liberating the Dalits as

independence from British colonial rule only meant a new opportunity for the upper caste Indians to transform themselves into new colonizers and further strengthen the discriminatory rules and practices that diminish the Dalit people further. Unfortunately, neither the nationalist writers nor the postcolonial theorists acknowledge the people at the lowest level of caste/class hierarchy. The elitist high caste/class continued to propagate the Brahminic values in their writings and their political, social, and economic representations transformed the lower castes and minorities into the new colonized people. The high caste nationalist imaginary, Aloysius thinks, “far from integrating the now politically awakened other eco-zones and the subordinated castes and their leadership in comradeship of equality and fraternity, sought to exclusively and hegemonically represent the entire population” (“Caste in and above History” 167). Those who followed the footsteps of Gandhi and Nehru belittled caste-based atrocities completely abandoning the masses who were the most affected victims of the Brahminic hierarchical order. Because the independence shifted colonial power to the elite upper caste people, the lower castes remained at the same position, even worse in many areas, not only in the socio-political centers but also in the literary centers, which were controlled by the privileged upper caste/class. As a result, the marginalized caste/class has to continuously fight an ideological battle against the postcolonial ruling caste/class that the freedom from the British colonizer was not freedom for all. Dalit writers take the position that the postcolonial writers fail to recognize the subjectivity of the subaltern other and its marginalized location. By examining the deficiencies and misrepresentations of the “master” narratives, Dalit writers attempt to dismantle historical/textual disjuncture of the nationalist discourse and the universalized colonizer/colonized binary that the

postcolonial theory produces. In order to understand the existence of caste in South Asian literature, a close look at its historical background is important.

The mainstream South Asian literary tradition is built upon the romanticization of the mythical past that glorifies the classical Brahminic society imagined and explained in the old Sanskrit texts. It largely stems from and engages with the mythical stories that began with the destruction of the pre-Aryan indigenous civilization by the alien invaders, the Aryan people, which most of the South Asian scholars theorize as the Aryan Race Theory.¹³ According to them the departure from the pre-Aryan civilization, believed to be an egalitarian society began with the composition of the Vedas, which are one of the earliest literatures in the history of humanity. The imagination of the hierarchical society based on the birth of a person is considered to have germinated in the early Vedas and becomes a central idea that dictates how the society should function. The varna system began to operate with a clear distinction made between who controls the power and resources, and who remains permanently subservient. Though the idea of varna/caste was not fully developed in the early stages of the Sanskrit textual tradition, the hereditary division of people germinated in them. In Wendy Doniger's reading:

Society was already divided into four classes in the *Rig Veda*: the priests (Brahmins) who ruled the roost of the first class, the warrior-kings of the second class, the merchants and landowners who made up the third class, and a fourth class of servants, the defining 'others' who were disenfranchised, not Aryan, but still marginally Hindu. (6)

¹³ See Romila Thapar's "The Theory of Aryan Race and India: History and Politics"

Often quoted, “The Purusha Shukta”¹⁴ in the *Rig Veda* imagines the primeval male, the Divine Man, who gave birth to the first men on earth with definite roles attributed to each of them which latter scriptures developed as the varna/caste system. According to Purusha Sukta, the Brahmins came from the mouth of the Purush, the Kshatriyas from his arm, the Vaishyas from his thighs and the Shudras from his feet (Mani 52). For Doniger, the Purusha Sukta “is the myth of the origin of the class system” (xiii). Most of the Dalit scholars, including Ambedkar, have seriously refuted this idea of stratification and Brahmic world view that undermines the meaning of existence of some people, pushing them to the bottom of the caste hierarchy, while it celebrates and exalts the others by assigning them the superior roles to dictate how the society is run. For Ambedkar, “Purushasukta recognizes two basic principles. It recognizes the division of society into four sections as an ideal. It also recognizes that the ideal relationship between the four sections is inequality” (Ambedkar and Moon 80). As ordained by the early scriptures, only the Brahmins were allowed to access education and other resources. They continued to propagate the Brahminic system through various forms of literature adhering to the central idea of social stratification which was the most effective weapon for subjugating the Others. Therefore, without access to education and various other social, political, and economic opportunities, the lower castes, mainly the “untouchable” castes, now popularly known as Dalits, remain out of the mainstream. The continuation of the high

¹⁴ *Purusha Sukta* is a ninetieth hymn in *Rigveda* attributed for the origination of varna/caste and is variously interpreted by the supporters and opposers of it (see Wendy Doniger, Kanchha Ilaiah, Gail Omvedt, B.R. Ambedkar; however, Hira Singh claims that its authenticity cannot be established and subsequent *dharmashastras* contradict the view of the *Purusha Sukta*)

caste Brahminic textual tradition underpins the Brahmins as the bearers of “purity” and the Shudras and Atishudras as the bringers of “pollution.” Lower castes who raised their voice for themselves or opposed the idea of the Brahminic world view were considered the ‘enemies’¹⁵ and were removed from the historical/cultural centers: “there are no records of these persons “speaking in their own voices” no forms of unadulterated self-representation” (Viswanath 30). The demonization of the oppositional standpoint continues in today’s India where the government is deeply involved in the incarceration of the Dalit/Adivasi intellectuals/writers for writing and taking their stance against the Hindutva ideology.

The new “Brown Masters” replaced the old white masters with a new formula for nation building, largely invested in the Hindutva ideology of Savarkar and Golwalkar, which allowed entry only to the high caste people. Those who raise their voice against the Brahminic world view are either demonized or denied entry into the literary establishment and the historiographical records. Gandhi who stood firmly against the idea of caste equality and Nehru who largely supported the caste system and its inevitability in India occupy and overwhelm the Indian historiography as the major nationalist symbols. What remains is the amnesia—The amnesia that there were lower castes, Adivasis, Muslims and other minorities in the march of the Indian independence, and that they were suppressed, humiliated, and marginalized; the amnesia that these people had voices, aspirations, and desire for liberation, more so from the native colonizers than from the

¹⁵ Partha Chatterjee’s *I am the People* (2020) elaborately discusses how the Pro-Hindutva government has been deeply involved in the project of defining the Hindutva oppositional forces as the enemies of the nation.

alien ones. In this historical/cultural and religious/political disjuncture, Dalit literature needs to reconstruct a different space.

While the Dalit literature confronts Dalit degradation and subjugation within the caste system, and their (mis)representation in the mainstream literary/political discourses, the Adivasi literature interrogates the ruling high caste elite's version of Adivasi representation,

as a monochromatic figure; like the *rakshsan* or *nishacharan* of mythological stories. It was always a negative picture; he was depicted as apathetic, unable to react to injustice or worse, inhuman or sub-human, vicious . . . He existed for the sole purpose of being defeated and/or killed by the forces of virtue and goodness, represented by the upper castes. (Thankamma 208–09)

Adivasi literature confronts the dominant literary connotations which seriously undermine the Adivasi subjectivities and their distinctive historical/cultural presence. It speaks against their subjugation and degradation by the “outsiders” who, on the one hand, attempt to assimilate the Adivasis into the Hindu fold, and on the other, project them as the “uncivilized” people waiting to be rescued by the high caste ruling elites.

Adivasi literature does not interrogate caste system explicitly. However, this dissertation argues that it questions the centrality of caste in defining the Indian nation-state and its dominant Hindutva discourse. It questions the Hindutva ideology's labelling of any idea that opposes its world view as “antinationalist.” In this way, *caste* posits itself at the heart of Adivasi literature.

The term “Adivasi” is the Hindi word for “indigenous people” in South Asia. This nomenclature, which does not have any record in “any early epigraphy or texts relevant

to the study of the subcontinent” (Banerjee 9) entered the social/political discourses to refer to certain category of people “having different connotations in relation to people-place relationships, referring to wide-ranging topographies and inhabitations” (Rycroft and Dasgupta 1). The South Asian nation states do not officially recognize the term “Adivasi” but use the colonial term “tribe” to name a wide range of diverse communities in the political/legal representations. The nationalist historiography employs the term “tribe” in a similar fashion as the colonial historians do to relegate the indigenous communities to an “inferior” position and to justify the elite bourgeoisie’s interference in indigenous cultures in the name of “modernity.” The appropriation of the term, “tribe,” “in the legal frameworks of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal has ossified a colonial term into a postcolonial reality” (Rycroft and Dasgupta 16). Postcolonial administrative bodies reconstitute the image of the various tribal communities having completely different historical conditions into one broad category based on the colonial historiography and its degrading terminologies such as “barbaric,” “uncivilized,” “backward” etc. This not only undermines the subjectivities of these communities, which have been subjugated by the dominant groups, it also denies the existence of any cultural/literary history of the Adivasi people. The theory of Adivasi as the original inhabitants of South Asia also is contested as there are many tribal communities which came to the Indian subcontinent after the supposed Aryan’s arrival to this area based on the Aryans’ invasion of the non-Aryan civilization and the permanent subjugation of the conquered people. Therefore, the demarcation of the Aryan conquest as the defining moment of indigeneity is problematic. It is therefore important to understand that there are multiple historical and geographical locations and that the authenticity of who the

indigenous, Adivasi people in South Asia are subject to interpretations. What is more important is the ways in which certain kinds of people are subjugated by others and are categorized as the inferior race by the dominant high caste ruling elites. Adivasi in this sense is a political identity rather than a historical one. Virginius Xaxa observes that this “Adivasi” identity which,

was forced upon them from the outside precisely to mark their differences from the dominant community has now been internalized by the tribal people themselves. Not only has it become an important mark of social differentiation and identity assertion, it is also an important tool for the articulation of the demand for empowerment. (*State, Society, and Tribes* 28)

What needs to be emphasized in this context is that the “Adivasi” does not necessarily imply the original inhabitants of a certain place as there have been migrations in these lands and there is no concrete evidence to support these claims. Here, it is important to draw an analogy between the term Dalit and Adivasi. The state mechanism refuses using both terms in their official legal/political documents whereas respective communities take these terms to be enabling and empowering. Gandhians coined the patronizing terms, such as *ranipraraj*, *vanyajati* and *girijan*, implying “‘jungliness’ and ‘barbarity’ as well as ‘childishness’” (Hardiman, *The Coming of the Devi* 14) for the Adivasis in a similar vein as Gandhi used “harijan” for the untouchables. Either in the case of Dalits or in the case of Adivasis, the Gandhians seem to be interested in subsuming them into the Brahminic caste system in which these marginalized subalterns could permanently merge and continue to follow the “tradition.” Though the term, “indigenous,” “holds within it a tragic and an unending saga, an unceasing epic of “othering,” “alterity,” “exclusion” and

people being pushed out” (Devy, “The Languages in India and A Movement in Retrospect” 34), the term, “Adivasi,” in South Asian context, is considered to be “an important marker of identity and consciousness, which evokes a sense of self-esteem and pride rather than inferiority and shame, feelings that often accompany terms like tribe and tribal” (Xaxa, *State, Society, and Tribes* 38). David Hardiman, too, observes that “The term ‘Adivasi’ is preferable in Indian context because it relates to a particular historical development that of the subjugation during the nineteenth century of a wide variety of communities which before the colonial period remained free, or at least relatively free, from the controls of outside states” (*The Coming of the Devi* 15). The dominant ruling elites continue the propagation of indigenous inferiority more aggressively than the colonial authorities and are actively involved in dispossessing them of their autonomous territories, which do not just constitute the land per se but deeply connected histories of the Adivasis and their attachment with the lands.

The contemporary Adivasi literary consciousness stems from the pain of being dispossessed of their lands, cultures, and subjectivities. It attempts to reinscribe the Adivasi historical/material condition and to reassert the ways in which the Adivasi world differs from the other religio/cultural practices. Adivasi literature interrogates the mainstream nationalist and postcolonial literary discourses, which do not recognize any historical/cultural presence and the relevance of the Adivasis identity. The mainstream Brahminical historiography and the literary/political discourse either erased the history of

Adivasi cultural/literary presence and its mythologies or appropriated the Adivasi cultural movement, such as the Devi movement¹⁶ in terms of caste society. Hardiman argues:

The fact that they practised so many different methods of cultivation, that they are known to have migrated from one area to another, and that they were in some cases a regionally dominant power—all indicate that their history was every bit as full and complex as that of the rulers whose deeds fill medieval ballads and chronicles. (*The Coming of the Devi* 13)

Adivasi literary consciousness is coupled with a sense of distinctive cultural imagination and an assertion of a specific construction of their territorial space. G.N. Devy argues that “Indian literature has been burdened for the last two centuries by the ‘perspective imagination’ of Western origin. Because our systems of knowledge have been more or less replaced by Western systems, the tribal is now the only Indian unaffected by the colonial consciousness” (“Introduction” xii). This distinctive literary/cultural consciousness does not engage in contemplating the dominant literary narratives and its Hindutva ideology that denies the “Adi-dharma,” original belief system, and systemically marginalizes the Adivasi agency. Instead, it locates the Adivasi epistemologies in their oral tradition and their life world that is closer to their habitations, the lands, which need to be reimagined as ecology “as inclusive of forest, field, minerals, water and animals on the one hand and of specific modes of habitation of and relation to such land on the other” (Banerjee 144). The state institutions present the Adivasi lands to be merely the

¹⁶ David Hardiman, *The Coming of Devi: Adivasi Assertion in Western India*. New Delhi: Oxford University, 1987. P.12

places of material production for profit and as the sites still uncharted by the bourgeois modernity where “outsiders” can go and invade for their “industrial” projects.

Brahminic philosophy imagines a society of unequals and prescribes a system that continues to produce the hierarchies of caste and class and maintains the control of upper caste people on all the resources in the world. This discriminatory practice, which Kancha Ilaiah vehemently condemns as “spiritual fascism” (*Buffalo Nationalism: A Critique of Spiritual Fascism* xviii) continues to threaten the Adivasi communities and cultures. The Vedic texts describe the people that the first Aryan invaders encountered in the Indian subcontinent to be the *dasas*, slaves,¹⁷ “who were ethnically and culturally different as their complexion was dark and the Aryas considered them sub-human” (P. Mukherjee 18). E.M.S. Namboodiripad compares the caste system with the slave system of the ancient world. He says:

There is no fundamental difference between the slave system that rose in ancient Greece, Rome and some other west Asian countries and the varna-caste system that developed in India. The essential feature of both the systems is the contradiction between the exploiters and the exploited. But there is one difference: in one system a large majority of the people were subjected to exploitation by openly declaring them as slaves, whereas in the other, the same thing was done in the guise of caste. (20)

The caste exploitation is more subtle and more dangerous because the system in place establishes the hereditary caste hierarchy as the norm and does not explicitly declare

¹⁷ For comprehensive study of varna/caste in Vedic literature see Prabhati Mukherjee’s *Beyond the Four Varnas: The Untouchables in India*.

master-slave power relation. The Vedic texts show that the Aryan conquerors¹⁸ permanently enslaved the conquered indigenous people and represented them as the lesser human beings, even though they were “wealthy and several towns were inhabited solely by them” (P. Mukherjee 18) before the Aryan onslaught in their lands. The Adivasi literature attempts to subvert these assumptions and reassert the Adivasi claim to their lands and cultures.

The state under different disguises—modernization, urbanization, civilization so on and so forth—interferes with the Adivasi lands and cultures. Anand Teltembde observes that “[t]he Indian state’s record in rehabilitating those it displaces in the name of development has been dismal. All these projects, Jawaharlal Nehru’s ‘temples of modern India’, proved catastrophic for hundreds and thousands of adivasis and Dalits, who not only lost their homes but their only source of living” (*The Persistence of Caste: The Khairlanji Murders and India’s Hidden Apartheid* 168). Mining companies which work hand in hand with the political, financial, and legal entities of the state “use complex strategies of promises, threats and rewards, working together as a team ... [Their] natural and cultural wealth is being sold off to companies and banks pursuing the sole aim of maximising profit, institutionally blind and heedless of destruction to nature as well as human beings” (Padel and Das xxi). *War and Peace* (2002), a documentary film by Anand Patwardhan shows the devastating effects of India’s nuclear program and uranium mining on the Adivasi population and the surrounding environment in Jadugoda,

¹⁸ Prabhati Mukherjee’s *Beyond the Four Varnas* illuminates the detailed Vedic textual references in relation to Aryan/non-Aryan conflicts and the beginning and evolution of varna/caste system.

Jharkhand. Mining displaced Adivasis from their farming lands and jobs and many people are forced to work in the uranium mines as laborers without proper protection from the heavy doses of radioactive materials. The exposure to the radioactive materials from the mining factory and the tailings has created serious health hazards to the local population and the environment. Innocent villagers are dying of cancer and other “strange” diseases every day, but the authorities are indifferent to the agonizing situation of the Adivasis.¹⁹ Whenever the victims protest “against [the] radiation they call us traitors” (*War and Peace*). In the race of being a nuclear power nation in the world, postcolonial India silences, annihilates and forgets the Adivasis.

The emergence of Adivasi literature stems from the historical and material factors: the policy of economic liberalization, translated into “wanton loot of water, forests and land – the prime resources of the tribes – even to the point of putting their lives at risk” (Meena). Adivasi literature which emerges out of the centuries of dispossession and displacement, instigates a radical break, “Along with a creative re-appropriation and self-presentation of one’s pain, it is a consciousness that, piercing the age old silence, seeks to shatter the conventional canonical enclosures and *Laxman Rekhas* that have been drawn by the dominant” (Gupta 21). It is the voice of Adivasi identity and their natural claim for their land. It is a campaign against the state, which “retains the sense of colonial hierarchy which the British Raj established, along with the ‘Saheb role’ of talking down to ‘inferiors,’ who pass this on with interest” (Padel and Das 433). The state perpetrates a discriminatory practice and attempts to bring the Adivasis into the “Hindu fold” to propagate its philosophy of caste hierarchy and castigate them

¹⁹ (*Buddha Weeps in Jaduguda*)

permanently into the margin. By strategically confining the Adivasis to the Hindu domain, Indian nation state undermines the Adivasi's right to follow their own "Adi-Dharma," the original belief system, "a spirit-centric world as opposed to anthropocentrism of the normative religions" (Munda x). Adivasi literature emanates from a revolutionary angst that shatters the establishment and speaks for an egalitarian society.

At the outset, Dalit and Adivasi literary movements seem disconnected. Dalit literary movement is against the ideology of caste hierarchy whereas Adivasi literary movement is against the systematic colonization enacted through the "developmental-material" projects. However, this dissertation demonstrates that both movements emerge out of resistance to the upper caste hegemony of the Hindutva ideology and interrogate the centrality of caste and its so-called eternal and unalterable authority.

Indian mainstream historiography takes us through the Brahmanical viewpoint of the historical events, and the construction of the nationalist discourse based on the Hindu mythologies. Mani argues that "Indian historiography, like the nation and nationalism, has been a victim to the brahmanical tendency to perpetrate that truth that serves the self-interests of the upper castes and helps maintain their monopoly over knowledge and power" (370). This stream of history is biased towards the Aryan people who later called themselves Hindus and distorted the other historical/political/cultural realities. On the other hand, the Marxists are interested in writing history based on "what instruments of production were existing at each historical epoch, what were the social relationships that governed production with such instruments, and how the changes in social relations led to political clashes, wars and revolutions" (Namboodiripad 1). Whatever the case, one

reality resurfaces again and again in all these historiographical documents—a large number of people are subjected to exploitation permanently under the guise of multipronged varna/caste system. These subjugated people have been silenced and erased from the mainstream literary/political discourses. This dissertation undertakes a different approach to read the alternative cultures and imaginations which the conventional literary models consistently fail to acknowledge and incorporate. The following section briefly discusses how the chosen authors for this work, namely Bama, Limbale, Shekhar, and Ao demonstrate the ways in which Dalit and Adivasi literary/cultural voice intervenes in the hegemonic mainstream literary/political discourses on the one hand and calls for an alternative standpoint which recognizes Dalit and Adivasi subjectivities on the other.

The second chapter in this dissertation analyses Bama's work,²⁰ *Sangati* (2005), which stems from her lived experiences as a Dalit Christian woman and the ways in which her caste is positioned in the Hindu social order. On the one hand, she challenges the colonizer/colonized binaries of the postcolonial literature, which fail to acknowledge Dalit women's intersectionality in their triply marginal position, and on the other hand, interrogates the high caste elite literature, which propagates the Hindutva ideology and undermines the lower caste literary/cultural epistemologies. Bama interrogates the practice of untouchability and the segregation of people based on the idea of purity and pollution and calls for a rebellion against the culture that diminishes the Dalit women and silences them. As a close observer of the Christian churches' practices of caste

²⁰ There is not a clear way to categorise *Sangati* as a fixed genre work. It is a mix of autobiography, fiction, non-fiction, community narratives, so on and so forth. The translator of *Sangati*, Lakshmi Holmstrom says that it is an "autobiography of a community".

discrimination, she exposes the discrepancy between the professed beliefs of Christianity, a supposedly casteless religion, and its casteist practices in India. Amidst the hostile environment and Dalit literature being labeled as “anarchist and divisive” (Pandian, “On a Dalit Woman’s Testimonio” 129), Bama’s unconventional literary journey confronts many inferiorizing and disciplining narrative discourses. Bama challenges the appropriation of the Dalit people and claims the silenced voice of the Dalit women who are depicted as the silent victims of high caste men and their own men in the dominant literary discourse. Bama’s work shows that the dominant literary traditions cannot represent Dalit people and their literary/cultural location and questions the nationalist and postcolonial literary domains for their failure to address the people at the bottom of South Asian societies.

The third chapter explores Limbale’s novel, *Hindu* (2010). Limbale speaks in a similar fashion but from a different geographical and gender location and confronts the nationalist and postcolonial literary establishments by engendering a caste lens as the central tool to investigate the South Asian literature and society. He observes that the traditional literary aesthetics fails to address the social realities of the South Asian societies, and therefore the Dalit writers should “insist on the need for a new and distinct aesthetic for their literature—an aesthetic that is life-affirming and realistic” (Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations* 19). As other Dalit writers, Limbale is influenced by Ambedkar’s work, which recognizes Brahminic caste system as a major hindrance to South Asian societies and calls for the annihilation of caste. Limbale questions the dominant literary traditions that either obliterate the Dalit presence in the socio-political activities or present them as passive

characters without their own voice. He suggests that Dalit literature is an alternative literary/theoretical paradigm which represents the voice of the historically marginalized people and their cultural consciousness which the mainstream literature deliberately erased. For Limbale, Dalit identity cannot be established in the conventional literary/political framework but in the recognition of the caste system and its various implications.

The fourth chapter investigates Shekhar's text, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015). It is a collection of stories, which was banned by the Jharkhand state government on the charge of 'misrepresenting' the Adivasi people. He has faced death threats in relation to his writing. His effigy was burned, and he was suspended from his job for some time. The state was actively involved in antagonizing his image as a writer/activist. The reason behind this negation is Shekhar's refusal to accept the dominant literary tropes for the representation of the Adivasi identity. Shekhar's characters inhabit a world that is beyond the expectation of the dominant cultural/literary codes, and their voices emerge as an interrogation of the tendencies of universalization of literary/cultural artifacts, which deliberately ignore the fact that the "colonized" also can become oppressors. Land is central in Adivasi imagination and their cultural representation. Shekhar responds to the state atrocities and its expropriation of Adivasi land, on the one hand, and on the other, represents the Adivasi culture. Shekhar's text dismantles the colonizer-colonized binary and shows that the nature and shape of indigenous subalternity are quite different from those produced by colonial relations. This marginal voice necessitates a consciousness that seeks to interrogate the elitist discourse and its systematic colonization of the Other, which is also castigated as "antinationalist" in South

Asian elite discourse of governance. Shekhar's narrative demonstrates that the Adivasis' identity is shaped by the culture that is quite different from the high caste cultural tradition, and that it is beyond the limitations of the nationalist and postcolonial literary imagination.

The fifth chapter engages with Ao's *These Hills Called Home* (2006). This collection of stories contemplates on how the state's invasion of the Naga territory and their culture leaves Naga psyche shattered. She takes us through various cultural contours of Adivasi Naga people and demonstrates how the Indian nationalist government forcibly dispossessed them of their land and denied the freedom they enjoyed in Nagaland. Ao's narrative empowers the Adivasi Naga people who have been projected as the enemies of the state for trying to protect their land and defend their identity. The suffering of the Naga people and the violence the Indian army carried out against them have not been the subjects of inquiry in the dominant literary works. Ao seeks to "revisit the lives of those people whose pain has so far gone unmentioned and unacknowledged" (Ao, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone IX*).

The dissertation's last chapter, the conclusion, reiterates the power of alternative imagination of Dalit/Adivasi discursive framework in the making and reclaiming of the subaltern subjectivities and the ways in which these narratives intervene in the conventional literary/political (mis)representation. It also emphasizes the centrality of caste in South Asian societies and stresses that no literary work from South Asia can be considered truly representative without a serious engagement with the caste system and its ramifications. This project concludes with a note that the emerging Dalit/Adivasi literary works invite us for a different reading of South Asian historiography and literary

conventions and ask us to move beyond the privileged voices to encounter the subaltern identity embedded in the Dalit/Adivasi epistemologies.

CHAPTER TWO

Recasting the Nation and Re-Claiming Dalit Women's Identity in Bama's

Sangati

Bama, like other Dalit writers tears down the façade of postcolonial Indian democracy. Her work, like her Dalit compatriots shows that independence from colonial rule came only for the elites that are high caste and therefore also high class. Bama, as a Dalit woman writer also highlights the triply oppressed condition of Dalit women subjects in contemporary India who are oppressed by the state and societal institutions, by the violence exercised by high caste men, and, also by the violence by Dalit men in the family.

Bama's work represents a revolutionary angst against the systemic oppression of Dalit women and their marginalized socio-political location. In a casteist society that pits every caste against the other caste, Bama's work underscores the lived experiences of the women at the bottom of socio-political hierarchy who are subjected to innumerable forms of discrimination that are accepted to be normal by the casteist society in postcolonial India. Bama underpins that the postcolonial writers fail to recognize the existence of the Dalit subaltern and its marginalized location. By examining the misrepresentations of the "master" narratives Bama not only dismantles the historical and historiographical omissions and commissions, but also the contemporary nationalist narrative of South Asia, which stems from the Brahminic world view based on the classical Sanskrit texts.

Bama's text portrays a postcolonial India which has betrayed Dalit women and confronts the dominant literary/cultural framework for its denial of Dalit women's humanity.

Postcolonial India and its nationalist idea present the high caste elites as the rightful inheritors of the resources available. Instead of building a unified inclusive nation-state, the high caste elites deny the so-called lower caste people access to the social, political, and economic opportunities. Dalits are pushed to the bottom of socio-cultural, and religio-political structure of the state and therefore, are excluded from any link with the state institutions for their livelihood. The Indian nationalist movement composed of Brahminic and other upper castes, G. Aloysius claims, "was at least as preoccupied with how to exclude other groups from power, as how to appropriate it from the British" (*Nationalism without a Nation in India* 222). Because independence shifted the colonial power to the high caste elite people, the lower castes still remained at the bottom as they had been for centuries. The new "masters" not only controlled the socio-political institutions but also the literary centers, which are denied to the subordinated caste/class people. This "total, complete and absolute substitution" (Fanon 35) of the British colonizers by the high caste elites built a narrow enclosure of nationalism that excluded all the lower caste people from the nationalist controlled spaces. Bama's literary counter discourse stems from the "denationalized" world of the subordinated caste/class who must continuously fight an ideological battle against the postcolonial ruling caste/class's claim that the freedom from the British colonizer was freedom for all. She seeks to interrogate the high caste elites' representation of the postcolonial India by portraying a different picture in *Sangati*, which is deeply ruptured by caste/class oppression and its multilayered effects.

Sangati engages the readers with multiple aspects of oppression Dalit women face in India. It begins with a description of the birth of the narrator, Pathima, in the Dalit basti. The narrator says that “In those days, there was no hospital or anything in our village. Even now, of course, there isn’t one” (*Sangati* 3). And little later, we learn that many Dalit women die in child birth (*Sangati* 36). These two short sentences encapsulate the stocktaking of the postcolonial India that Bama undertakes. Through a history of three generations, she shows that there is hardly any change in the lives of Dalit women. They work for high caste landlords (the book is scattered with references to the landlords) at below poverty wages and without any protection for their life and limb. Mariamma is severely injured while working at the well being dug. Her story is intertwined with those of others who were also injured and died doing the same kind of dangerous work. The employer is not held accountable for the injury or the death of the workers. A similar story is told about children who died while planting grams as they ate a few, not realizing that they were laced with chemicals. Child labour is rampant in the narrator’s village. Maikkanni, an eleven-year-old girl, carries the burden of raising her five siblings. She is forced to go to work at a factory, where she is abused by the factory owner. Pathima describes her malnourished face which should put India to shame. The child is hungry and deprived of education and exposed to dangerous chemicals in the match factory which make her stomachache. On top of that she is beaten so harshly, once for using too much glue and another time for “going.” They do not have toilets. As Maikkanni shows, the Dalit homes have no toilets either. Once again, the reader can surmise that the employer does not need to worry about the wellbeing of his workers and can flout all rules: low wages, dangerous working conditions, lack of amenities like toilets, and the

employment of child labourers who should rather be in school. Obviously, postcolonial India does not send any inspectors to these workplaces. This is how the postcolonial nation's factories' working conditions are. Bama's narrative shows us the real conditions of deprivation under which the poor continue to live long after India's independence.

What Mariamma and Maikkanni experience are some of the examples of what millions of Dalit children go through. These children are dispossessed of their childhood, and the opportunities that a child is expected to have in a modern society. These "dirty" children have been forgotten and their faces have been erased from the dominant literature. Bama's narrative interrogation exposes this "dirty" face of the Indian society that claims to have discovered a way to modernity, ironically leaving behind millions of its people under suppression and constant degradation. Bama is not invested in a modernity that stems from domination and exclusion of the lower caste people but in a "modernity as a promise and possibility while remaining conscious of its contradictions" (Satyanarayana 15). She is interested in the responsible task of unmasking the contradictions of the dominant literary narratives and asserting the Dalit identity with a reconfiguration of the hegemonic discursive modes that deny the assertion of Dalit subjectivity. Maikkanni's under-nourished body stands in stark contrast to the images of the children that the Indian state institutions and media represent. Bama constructs an image of Dalit children who have been marginalized and forgotten by the nationalist imaginary. These children are forced to bear the burden of the adult world but are deprived of food, shelter, and education in the postcolonial India.

The working conditions of Dalit women in the field are similarly dangerous. Rape is always a possibility and is discussed many times in the book. One of the first things

Paatti tells Pathima is to never go alone for gathering wood as the upper caste men can simply drag you away: “Women should never come on their own to these parts. If upper caste fellows clap eyes on you, you’re finished. They will drag you off and rape you, that’s for sure” (*Sangati* 8). Mariamma who is just recovering from the injuries after her fall into the well escapes an attempted rape from a high caste man. The community meeting gathered to discuss the case punishes her for “blaming” a high caste man. We see this ever-present danger described several times in the book. And if we step out of the narrative, then we know that Indian newspapers are full of stories of Dalit women raped and murdered in the fields.

Bama holds the rulers accountable for the extreme poverty and deprivation of Dalit women. We learn that women are paid less than men, “Even when they did the very same work, they were paid less. Even in the matter of tying up firewood bundles, the boys always got five or six rupees more” (*Sangati* 18). Shouldn’t the government be ensuring that their labour is rewarded fairly? The women discuss that they are helpless before the “evil” landlords as they need work in their fields. There are instances where police also side with the upper caste men. A Dalit woman reports, “we were beaten to a pulp” (*Sangati* 25). Bama further tells that “If ever there is a problem or a disturbance, everyone, starting with the police, chooses to blame and humiliate the women of our community. The government does not seem prepared to do anything to redress this” (*Sangati* 66). Not only this, we learn that the Dalit women stand in a mile long queue to get water (*Sangati* 63). They do not have bathrooms at home (described as a one-room space where many people eat and sleep). They go to Paraiya well once a week to bathe. Bama’s women ask again and again, “are we not human beings?” This question is asked

multiple times in *Sangati*. Several times they compare their treatment to animals. Thus, the text describes a postcolonial India which has not provided even the basic necessities of survival to Dalits.

In an intolerant caste society, which places the untouchable castes, or the Dalits beyond the frame of the four varnas and displaces them as the “pollutants,” Bama enters the literary world with a strong political conviction of liberation for Dalit women who are “Dalits” within the Dalit world. Bama’s work not only stirs the dominant Indian Tamil literary establishment with its piercing critique of Indian society and its hypocrisy but also dissects the Dalit community and its deep-rooted patriarchal system that denies women’s humanity and their rights as humans. Various feminist movements emerged in the history of women’s liberation struggles. Unfortunately, none of them chose to locate their attention on Dalit women and their uniquely gendered circumstances. Bama interrogates the South Asian feminism which does not seem to acknowledge the intersectionality of Dalit women’s conditions. By placing the caste and gender locations of Dalit women at the centre of her investigation Bama calls for an oppositional stance in the literary/political discourse that recognizes the need to dismantle the propagation of high caste elites’ versions of India. The dominant feminism attempts to homogenize the deeply heterogeneous women’s position and ignores the ruptures within the caste structures. The depiction of the Dalit women as the silent victims of the high caste men and the Dalit men in the dominant literary works underpins an assumption that Dalit women do not have their own voice and cannot speak for themselves. The challenge is to break this silence. The challenge is to interrogate the discourse that denied the Dalit women’s agency. The challenge is to discover Dalit feminism that contests the false and

problematic representation of the Dalit women in literatures. Bama, like the other Dalit feminists, seeks to intervene and redefine the Dalit feminist questions which are often overlooked or misrepresented in the dominant narratives. Though the mainstream Indian feminism and Dalit politics challenge patriarchy and Brahminism, “their construction of single-axis identities for ‘women’ and ‘dalits’ largely erases dalit women” (Pan, *Mapping Dalit Feminism: Towards and Intersectional Standpoint* 49). Bama understands this gap, and, with a unique Dalit women’s perspective, demonstrates that the mainstream feminism and the Dalit politics cannot identify and address the intersections of caste and gender, and the complexities of the dual patriarchies—Brahmanical and Dalit. Bama’s voice is a radical epistemological shift in feminism as introduced by the Dalit feminist standpoint, which, according to Sharmila Rege, “emerges from the practices and struggles of dalit women and may originate in the works of dalit feminist intellectuals” (99). The representation of Dalit women’s different experiences from their own viewpoint produces an entirely different discourse that could subvert the Dalit women’s diminishing portrayals in the dominant narrative discourse. Uma Chakravarty believes that “A Dalit feminist standpoint would be emancipatory for all social groups if it began with the experience of Dalit women, but also acknowledged position of *savarna*²¹ (non-Dalit) women, as well as their crippled epistemological positions” (“Afterword: The Burden of Caste Scholarship, Democratic Movements and Activism” 345). Chakravarti reminds us that the careful examination of the high caste women’s subordinated position could be helpful in strengthening the liberation movements of not only the Dalit women

²¹ savarna refers to the people within the fourfold varna system – Brahmin, Kshtriya, Vaishya and Shudra.

The Untouchables or the Dalits are outside of it and are called avarnas.

but also the other women who are also the victims of patriarchy and are engaged in struggles against it.

By confronting the erasure of Dalit women from the mainstream high caste South Asian feminist discourses and Dalit politics Bama's work underpins the necessity of a different language that could address the situation of uniquely gendered Dalit women placed in opposition to the high caste women who are privileged to be the representatives of the postcolonial nation's "true" character. In Bama's narrative world, Dalit women confront the "normative" Indian woman who is conditioned to retain the spiritual quality of feminine "virtues" and to nurture the patriarchal tradition laid down in the classical scriptures. The "common" woman is not in the purview of the nationalist narrative. She is:

coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, subjected to brutal physical oppression by males. Alongside the parody of the westernized woman, this other construct is repeatedly emphasized in the literature of the nineteenth century through the host of lower-class female characters who make their appearance in the social milieu of the new middle class—maidservants, washerwomen, barbers, pedlars, procuresses, prostitutes. It was precisely this degenerate condition of women which nationalism claimed it would reform, and it was through these contrasts that the new woman with nationalist ideology was accorded a status of cultural superiority to the westernized women of the wealthy parvenu families spawned by the colonial connection as well as the common women of the lower classes.(Chatterjee, "Nationalist Resolution of Women Question" 127–28)

These “common” women are excluded by the nationalist narratives as they are devoid of the nationalist characters assigned to the ideal woman. The postcolonial nation constructed on the Brahminical tradition has set a limited boundary for the women with its prescription of the specific nationalist characters which women must emulate to safeguard the idea of the spiritual women submissive to their husbands and other men in the family.

Bama rejects the narrow boundary of nationalism and portrays the life of Dalit women which directly contrasts with the nationalist representation of women. The hope of emancipation completely dissipated for Dalit women when the postcolonial high caste elites advocated for a new social responsibility for women with “spiritual purity,” and “bound them to a new, and yet entirely legitimate, subordination” (Chatterjee, “Nationalist Resolution of Women Question” 132). Chatterjee talks about the women’s subordination in general without any specific recognition of the Dalit women’s condition within the caste/gender hierarchy. To understand Dalit women’s subordination, we must get into the caste complexities and the ways in which the Dalit women are subjugated. The women Bama represents are like herself who are driven by “a passionate desire to create a new society made up of justice, equality and love. They, who have been the oppressed, are now themselves like the double-edged karukku,²² challenging their oppressors” (*Karukku* xiii). This call to challenge the oppressors who are legitimized by the religio-political institutions of the state highlights Bama’s articulation of a need for a

²² Translator of *Karukku*, Lakshmi Holmstrom describes, “Karukku means palmyra leaves, which with their serrated edges on both sides, are like double-edged swords”. See “Introduction” in *Karukku*.

collective resistance of the Dalit women. *Sangati* is one of these double-edged karukkus, which challenges the dominant narrative and its hegemonic lens.

Dalit Christian women are further down the hierarchy as Bama observes the casteist oppressions in the Catholic church. Christian missionaries chose to submit to the old Indian discriminatory caste tradition and practiced the caste rules in their religious locations. Dalit people who converted to Christianity hoping to escape the caste system are victimized further. Bama contests the Dalit oppression within the Christian religious institutions that practice caste system. When she encounters the casteist repression at the Church in the name of God, she wonders, “Why, even the nuns and priests, who claim that their hearts are set upon service to god, certainly discriminate according to caste” (*Karukku* 24). Bama in *Sangati* speaks about the Paraiyah women being more disadvantaged by their conversion to Christianity in comparison to other Dalit women such as Pallar, Koravar or Chakkiliyar who remained Hindu and got some advantages from the government whereas Paraiya women “get no concessions from the government whatsoever” (Bama, *Sangati* 5) because they are not Hindus. The lower caste people are reminded again and again about their subordinated location in society through various state apparatuses, in which religious institutions are one of the most powerful ones. The religious institutions enforce various sanctions on the lower caste people. Bama reflects:

Because Dalits have been enslaved for generation upon generation, and been told again and again of their degradation, they have come to believe that they are degraded lacking honour and self-worth, untouchable; they have reached a stage where they themselves, voluntarily, hold themselves apart. This is the worst injustice. This is what even little babies are told, how they are instructed. The

consequence of all this is that there is no way for Dalits to find freedom or redemption. (*Karukku* 24–25)

Bama unlike the mainstream literature that universalizes the high caste protagonist through hiding his or her caste, visibilizes her characters' caste and shows how their oppression is grounded in their caste identity. The mainstream texts are overburdened with the hegemonic responsibility of representing the Hindutva nation in which caste does not play a significant role. These texts deliberately subsume the caste into the nation's secular self by systematically evading the effects of caste and shielding the institution of caste with universalized features. Vivek Dhareshwar argues that the autobiography of the Indian secular self is written by the high caste elites. He claims that "a large part of our intellectual discourse has in fact been an autobiography of the secular [. . .] self. Its origin, its conflict with tradition, its desire to be modern" (219). The irony, though, with this secular national self is that it is devoid of caste, one of the major elements in Indian society that has been undeniably posited as a unique system of hierarchy and discrimination. The dominant literary establishment faults Dalit literature as being unliterary perhaps because of the fear that the caste question exposes the contradiction of the bourgeois nationalist narratives and their silencing of the marginal voices. One of the representative voices of the high caste men attacks Dalit writers for not writing "literature": "literature is not like politics where quotas are needed. Some Dalits are writing literature in order to carve a niche and become famous. However, this cannot happen because Dalits do not have the kind of language needed for writing literature" (qtd. in Mukherjee, *Postcolonialism: My Living* 47). The inherent anxiety implicit in this statement demonstrates the high caste elite writers' attitude towards Dalit literature's

intervention in the dominant literary domain with its radical call for reinterpretation of the high caste literary representation. More important perhaps is Dalit literature's politics of protest and rage against the bourgeois high caste narrative discourse that consistently denies the need to represent the way caste is present in Indian society. Bama's literary intervention in the elitist perspective and its propagation of the nationalist idea in which the caste is invisible points to the fact that Dalit literature necessitates an oppositional standpoint that dismisses the high caste elite literature which obscures caste and its systematic othering of the lower caste people. Bama recognizes that caste is the central force that determines someone's socio-cultural, religio-political and economic status in Indian society. The unwillingness of the dominant literary framework to accept the presence of caste in the literary narratives deliberately diminishes the alternative approach and its larger political/cultural themes that Dalit literature represents.

The aesthetic choice of Bama's literary work stands in opposition to the nationalist literary aesthetics that excludes the caste/class realities. Bama's literary aesthetics and narrative language in *Sangati* generate a significant attention in the literary circle not only for its representation of community and its collective suffering but also for Bama's questions that challenge to invalidate the dominant narrative underpinnings and their condescending portrayal of the Dalit people. This text exposes some of the most significant realities of Indian society that are ruptured by the caste system and gender discrimination. *Sangati's* "insignificant" everyday realities of the Dalit women in the poor, isolated Dalit basti create an uneasy condition for the beneficiaries of caste system and its advocates, who fear that equality will end the upper caste privileges, the "structural dividend" (Uprety) that the high caste people have enjoyed for centuries.

Sangati means events in Tamil language. Bama narrates the events that the Dalit women are engaged in, the events that are not important for the upper caste elite writers, the events that are “invisible,” and are therefore not considered worthy of any literary merit by the dominant literary establishment. Departing from the conventional literary narrative technique, and its structural, literary, and thematic expectations of bourgeois individualism, Bama refuses to narrow down the Dalit collectivity to be individualistic and dares to violate the conventional boundaries of a fictional text departing from the conventional narrative technique and its aesthetic, literary and thematic expectations. Bama uses a conversational literary form and vocabulary of the marginalized Dalit people that regulate the matrix of Dalit culture and identity. Amidst the hostile environment and Dalit literature being levelled as “anarchist and divisive” (Pandian, “On a Dalit Woman’s Testimonio” 129), Bama’s unconventional literary journey challenges many inferiorizing and disciplining practices of dominant literary discourse. Through a narrative mode that challenges the way a conventional novel is perceived, Bama considers a more heterogeneous structural mode which includes mythical, historical, and communal traditions that surround Dalit life. In the introduction to the text Lakshmi Holmstrom speaks of *Sangati* as a mixed genre work, combining autobiography, fiction, and polemics. She also calls it the autobiography of a community. It is not a novel in the western sense but a series of conversations between several women reported by the narrator. This unconventional narrative arc sets a unique trajectory of a literary work that confronts the way we consume the conventional literary texts.

Bama begins her text with her narrator’s reflection on the moment of her birth in which her grandmother, Paatti, reminds the women attending the birth that the birth of a

girl child in the family is a matter of celebration, quoting a proverb, “if the third is a girl to behold, your courtyard will be filled with gold” (Bama, *Sangati* 3). This proverb establishes an important connection to the historical register that indicates a better position of women as compared to the present time that Bama’s narrator and her contemporaries experience. Paatti seems to be infusing some cultural indicators to the women attendees to educate them to treat girls with love and respect. Paatti attends to deliver childbirths in the Dalit basti and knows about every child in the Dalit community. Not only the stories about the birth of the children of her community Paatti also narrates many mythical and real stories that relate to Dalit women. It is through her stories that Pathima understands Indian society and the limits of caste and its layers that cripple the dream of liberation for lower caste people.

There are men in the Dalit basti, only not in the narrator’s family. They are absent because they are labouring in other places. That is part of the unemployment and joblessness that Dalits suffer from, and which leads to Dalit women having to work for themselves unlike their high caste counterparts, who are completely dependent on their men. Paatti’s husband, the narrator’s grandfather is given historical identity of millions of Dalits who migrated to Sri Lanka and other places to work as indentured workers. He and many others disappeared without a trace. Mainstream history has erased them too.

Bama’s narrative is not merely a story of her community which is ghettoized, and then forgotten, but it is an interrogation of the meaning and the outcomes of the Indian independence which claims to liberate all the people irrespective of caste, class, or gender. Independence left behind millions of lower caste people’s voices and aspirations. Dalits are not the subjects of any of the post-independence mainstream political/literary

narratives. Postcolonial India does not know the existence of Dalit people. In this context Bama shows her irreverence to Gandhi despite the central place he occupies in the high caste imaginary by relegating him to the margin of her text: Paatti uses his murder and death to date her daughter's wedding. She did not know him and recalls him after some difficulty, "who is that man they called Gandhi?" And he is not recalled for the deeds he claimed he did for the welfare of "Harijans," but because as an illiterate woman, she does not know the year of her daughter's wedding. Gandhi's passing is brought to her attention because "they" were talking about him. Thus, very subtly, Bama shows the irrelevance of Gandhi to Dalit life.

Why a nationalist figure, such as Gandhi is merely footnoted in Bama's text is an interesting question that needs a serious investigation. The nationalist high caste elite narrative is overloaded with Gandhi's presence. His fragile body and his rhetoric of non-violence are some of the most revered nationalist symbols. However, these nationalist symbols do not carry any currency in the liberation movement of the Dalit people and their ongoing struggle to fight against caste discrimination. One of the important historical events in Dalit history is Gandhi's 1932 debate with Ambedkar on separate electorates for Dalits, which strengthened the upper caste rhetoric of the new nation with Gandhi's persistent support to the idea of "Ram Rajya". What Ambedkar demanded for Dalit people's liberation and their share in national political space was thwarted by Gandhi's "fast unto death" protest resulting in the defeat of Ambedkar's fight for separate electorates for Dalit people. The nationalists and the postcolonislists choose not to unpack Gandhi's stance on the infantilization of the untouchables and his persistent glorification of the Brahminic tradition. Most of the postcolonial theoretical works refrain

from acknowledging Gandhi's debates with Ambedkar, which culminated in what is famously known as the Poona Pact through which Gandhi denied separate electorates to Dalits. The postcolonial theorists, instead, highlight Gandhi's appearance and lifestyle as exemplary through which he could serve the purpose of uplifting the downtrodden people. One of the important postcolonial theorists, Robert J.C. Young's portrayal of Gandhi is a good example of his glorification:

Gandhi himself identified with those excluded from the public world of Indian life, impoverished people who today would be described as subalterns—particularly the peasants and those excluded from the caste system, the so-called untouchables. In his dress and cultural identifications Gandhi constructed an eccentric subject position at the outer limits of marginalization and social exclusion, a radical declaration against elitism and orthodox class politics alike. No anticolonial leader identified himself more publicly and absolutely with the wretched of the earth than Gandhi. (320–21)

In reality, Gandhi's stance against the untouchable, "Harijans" in relation to their liberation from all sorts of discrimination undercuts the notion that Gandhi was the champion of the "wretched of the earth" and that the Postcolonial nation is invested deeply in uplifting and empowering the Dalits. The Dalits believe that Gandhi infantilizes them with his patronizing term "Harijan" and seeks a reformation within the Brahminic caste system by merely removing untouchability. Gandhi's overtly Brahminic lifestyle and viewpoint demonstrate that he was not ready to accept and confront the caste system as an evil unto Indian society. Rather he fought for the establishment of the newly independent nation based on the "glory" of the classical Brahminic tradition. Unlike

Young's claims, Gandhi is claimed to have served the interest of the high caste elites as many Dalit scholars increasingly contest his overt preaching and practices of Brahminic lifestyle. Gandhi's interest in removing untouchability and "Harijan" upliftment program did not work because "Harijans were not to have any say in the running of the different programs because it was the duty of the upper castes, and more importantly the finance came solely from them" (Aloysius, *Nationalism without a Nation in India* 209–10).

Aloysius further unpacks Gandhian conundrum with a deconstruction of caste politics within the high caste elites that "the depressed classes were merely objects to be exploited for the political salvation of the upper castes" (*Nationalism without a Nation in India* 210) in which Gandhi merely wished for their cleanliness and discipline; their socio-economic or political changes were not intended. Ambedkar critiques Gandhi's fascination with the classical tradition as a way backward, "Under Gandhism the common man must keep on toiling ceaselessly for a pittance and remain a brute. In short, Gandhism with its call of back to nature, means back to nakedness, back to squalor, back to poverty and back to ignorance for the vast mass of the people" (Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables* 255). Bama unburdens this historical façade through a subtle interplay of the Gandhian reference that Paatti yokes to show the irrelevance of Gandhi to Dalit life. Thus, the grand narrative of the "father of the nation" is not really a story of celebration for the Dalits, but a display of high caste elite's inherent interest to suppress Dalits by subsuming them within the Gandhian political trap. Bama's text only spares a footnote for Gandhi and invites the readers to understand the Gandhian paradox that estranged Ambedkar and Gandhi, and by implication, Dalit people and Gandhian nationalism. The movement leading to a fair

political representation failed because of the opposition of Gandhi and the Congress party. This, as Ramesh Kamble, demonstrates:

[P]erhaps caste Hindu hegemony would have ‘tolerated’ Dalits entering the temples, and occupying a designated space in religious structures, but Dalit assertion for a share in modern resources capable of initiating social change and thereby undermining the authority of Brahminism was visualized as a real threat to Brahminical hegemony. (141)

What the world knows about this “great” man is not in the songs of the Dalit women, not in the parlance of the Dalit women, not even in their memory. The so-called father of the nation and the signifier attached to it by the nationalist is not significant in Dalit life and literature. Gandhi’s overwhelming presence in the Indian historiography, literature and freedom movement sits uneasily in the lives of Dalit people as they see no meaning attached to him for their liberation and equality. For Paatti and all other Dalit women Gandhi’s name has no significance. The postcolonial India does not address Dalits’ survival issues. Bama’s women ask again and again, “are we not human beings?” Several times in the text, Dalit women compare their treatment with that given to animals. It is in this context that Bama revokes Gandhi’s rhetoric on caste and his infantilization of Dalit people who are dispossessed from the state resources. This is an uneasy conjecture.

Bama finds meaning and power in the language of Dalit women whose raw, unpolished, everyday language becomes a strong weapon to protest against the oppressors and assert their existence. Bama chooses this language as a literary language of her textual world that charts a different territory than the one that is found in the dominant literary works. What is inherent in the Dalit women’s angst is the desire to be

free, the desire to be equal, the desire to be independent, the desire to be human. The subalterns have been speaking for centuries, they have been asserting their desire for equality and freedom, but the dominant group either silences them or misrepresents them. By reproducing their speech in their own language without “authorial interference” Bama shows that Dalit women are different, and their worldview differs from the other people. The narrative in *Sangati* unfolds in a non-linear fashion which, as Toral Jatin Gajjarawala remarks, “is marked by a conscious historical and cultural specificity and is hardly interested in the time-and-spacelessness characteristic of other forms of futurism” (“Some Time between Revisionist and Revolutionary: Unreading History in Dalit Literature” 576). The historical and cultural signifiers get intertwined with the lived experiences of Dalit people and get transmitted through the unraveling of the conventional historical/material framework that attempts to transcode “caste and caste relations into something else” (Pandian, “One Step Outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere” 1735). Pandian suggests that caste has been obliterated from the Indian nationalism and its discourse on the “national culture.” The Indian nationalism foregrounds Hindu upper caste culture as Indian culture, and inferiorizes the lower caste cultures as antagonist to the classical Brahmanic tradition. The rhetoric that constitutes the lower caste as the “other,” by implication, indicates that the upper caste is represented as the Indian secular self, which Dhareshwar argues, stands in opposition to the heterobiography of the secular self which envisions the possibilities of “conceiving the caste politics differently” (222). *Sangati* challenges the way the “autobiography” of the Indian secular self is conceived as casteless in the dominant discourses and demonstrates that caste sits at the centre of everything; as Bama argues, “there can be no getting round

this question of caste” (*Sangati* 120). Caste must be addressed in order to understand Indian society.

The propagation of the upper caste elite nationalist culture and its normalization constructs the “other” cultures and discourses as “antinationalist” in a perpetual conflict with the nationalist imaginary. The cultural/historical counter discourse that the anti-Brahminical movement produces stands as an antagonistic force to the nationalist elites. The routine accusation of the scholars such as B.R. Ambedkar, RVM Periyar and others (Gajarawala, “Some Time between Revisionist and Revolutionary: Unreading History in Dalit Literature” 578) attests to the fact that the nationalist project is interested in a systematic delinking of the scholars, writers, and the alternative narratives that challenge its main thrust. It is also a way to keep the inclusion of the caste question in the political/cultural/literary debate at bay. Categorizing the alternative voices that interrogate the Brahminic world order, as “antinationalist” is perhaps the safest way for the high caste elites to antagonize these voices and suppress them. When we see the current news on the contemporary India, we are flooded with the instances of Dalit scholars/writers constantly shamed, incarcerated, and jailed. The postcolonial India is intolerant of the alternative imagination.

Bama’s work on the other hand demands a specific lens to grasp the complexities of caste and its centrality in the South Asian society. It explicitly articulates caste as the most uneasy disjuncture that occupies the elite nationalist psyche in a disguised form which “was always surrounded by embarrassment, uneasiness, ambivalence, and, sometimes, even guilt” (Dhareshwar 219). *Sangati* places caste at the centre and Dalit women as its powerful interlocutors in an unconventional narrative oeuvre that seeks to

unearth what the conventional literary establishment deliberately elides. While caste determines where one locates and what privilege one gets because of his/her caste, Dalit women's gender further constricts their space. Pathima, in one of her conversations with Paatti asks:

Why can't we be the same as boys? We aren't allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily; even when we sleep we can't stretch out on our back nor lie face down on our bellies. We always have to walk with our heads bowed down, gazing at our toes. You tell us all this rubbish and keep us under your control. Even when our stomachs are screaming with hunger, we mustn't eat first. We are allowed to eat only after the man in the family have finished and gone. What, Paatti, aren't we also human beings? (Bama, *Sangati* 29)

Paatti does not have answers to Pathima's questions. She invokes the tradition of discrimination as a norm and finds no other way than to accept the inferior position of women as inscribed in the "sacred" books that are infused with the myths of pollution attached to women. The dominant textual tradition which has created a discourse that keeps women and lower caste people in a subordinate position permanently is considered unquestionable. Asking a caste question becomes abnormal in such a society which rigidly internalizes and normalizes the caste/gender discrimination. Paatti is scared to challenge the Brahminic world view, which is legitimized through the sacred texts. "It is as if Paatti and her ilk have come to accept their low subservient position, and that is where they are doomed to remain" (S. S. Thomas 252). Dalit women see no other alternative than the ones that are prescribed by the high caste Hindu caste/gender tradition. The words of the *Manusmriti* and other Sanskrit texts are transmitted into

everyday life as reality in order for the high caste men to maintain their superior position permanently. The Sanskrit texts self-legitimize the Brahminical position and marginalize the Dalit cultural positions as sham and illegitimate. D.D. Nagaraj argues, “the surest characteristic of the Brahmin sensibility is the belief that the texts are a substitute for reality; that texts are the only reality, the rest is all illusion” (187). Paatti’s perception of the mythical stories as real, as Nagaraj’s articulation, demonstrates a predominant aspect of the lower caste and Dalit people’s perception of their humiliation as justified. Dalits are prevented from thinking beyond the stories of their diminishment.

Paatti responds to the narrator’s question with the bits of her knowledge acquired through the same cultural hegemony that normalizes the caste/gender discrimination, “Do you think it’s been like this just yesterday or today? Hasn’t all been written about in books as well, haven’t you read about it” (Bama, *Sangati* 29)? What are the books that Paatti is referring to? What books are used as tools for a constant reminder of the Dalit and other lower caste people’s inferior position in Indian society? Paatti refers to the “books” not specifying any particular one, perhaps, to emphasize the magnitude of the books as the determinants of people’s lives and the perpetual denigration of the lower caste people. Books have power to determine and define one’s cultural/political position in society. The meaning implicit in the reference to the “books” is quite significant in Bama’s text. The denial of the cultural and spiritual presence of Dalit and the lower caste people by the dominant literary and the cultural ideology propagated in these books that Paatti has heard about stems from the fear that the alternative perspectives might empower the subordinated people and thereby give them power to speak. The counter discourse is only limited to the educated few and the counter consciousness to question

the orthodoxy remains beyond the reach of most Dalit people. Because “folk epics, which are necessarily the creations of subaltern communities, are never canonised in the history and theories of Indian literature” (Nagaraj 190), the only books and the stories presented are the Brahminic literary/religious works disseminated as the authentic Indian texts. Postcolonial India’s careful and systematic exclusion of the Dalits from the alternative knowledge building opportunities eliminates the possibility of creating an oppositional poetics of the Indian subalterns. Paatti cannot think and go beyond the high caste cultural belief system and make sense of the Dalit women’s (in)significance in the textual/cultural tradition. What she knows is that the Dalit women are insignificant, and they have to follow the “tradition” without any question. Her perception of women’s subjugated position to men attests to an understanding of her generation that the Dalit women cannot hope for liberation because the narratives that have been transferred to them as “real” completely negate its possibility. It is not that Paatti does not understand the value of independence and liberation, but that she does not have the tools to unpack the complexities of cultural/religious codes that dictate her actions and limit her access to alternative knowledge. Paatti’s world is not filled with choices but ruled by an uncompromising patriarchy defined and controlled by the upper caste elites and attested and enforced also by the Dalit men. The narrator constantly seeks to dismantle the double binding trap of servitude and submission that the Dalit women are imprisoned by. What could Paatti do to liberate herself and advocate for the liberation of other women of her community when she knows that even the wife of the most revered Tamil philosopher

and poet, Tiruvalluvar²³ had to follow the dictates of the patriarchal norms. Paatti explains:

Seems she would sit next to her husband, pick up the grains of cooked rice that scattered from his leaf with a needle, and rinse them out. Must have been a very finicky lady. Look, why couldn't she have picked them up with her fingers? Anyway, the point is what even in those days, the women ate after the men.

(*Sangati* 30)

Paatti seems to have concluded that the dream of equality and freedom is a false hope, an impossibility because the narratives that feed her mental/spiritual memories unfailingly justify women's subordination even if these narratives are from or about those people considered to be the champions of equality and as revered as Tiruvalluvar.

The "books" propagated the distorted realities and put a system in place in which there is no presence of the lower caste people, either real or imaginary. The postcolonial narrative which claims to represent India and its people in reality paints Indian 'people' in the lineaments of the upper caste people, presenting them as the "real" Indians and pushes the lower caste people to the margin of the national imaginary. The nationalist fervor carries with it the figures such as Gandhi, Nehru, Patel etc. as the most revered and inseparable from the imaginations of the "people" while completely silencing Ambedkar, Phule, Periyar and many others who recognized the value of true equality and fought for

²³ T.P. Meenakhisundaran in *Philosophy of Tiruvalluvar* assumes that Tiruvalluvar was a lower caste man, "born to a Brahmin by a Harijan woman" but there is no clear proof of his biographical information. He claims that Tiruvalluvar's time could be around the closing years of 3rd century. *Tirukkural*, a classic Tamil text, considered to be "a national Bible of the Tamilians" is composed by Tiruvalluvar.

the emancipation of millions of lower caste people. The India that the grand narratives represent is an India in which only the upper caste elites have voice, and Paatti and her folks have been permanently silenced and forgotten. What Paatti gathers from what she hears is the painful realization that she and her people are supposed to carry on the life of servitude without questioning the authority. Paatti knows so many stories of people in her community but none of these stories seem to have a place in the dominant narratives of the postcolonial India that untiringly replicate the idea that the nation is worshipped as the mother, and hence all mothers are revered and respected. Quite contrary to what it claims, what Dalit people experience is the perennial barrier against participating in any of the democratic processes and institutions which are supposed to enhance their status as citizens. Paati does not fall under the category of the revered mother that the postcolonial India claims it worships.

The postcolonial India not only erases the Dalit people from its narrative discourses, but also deprives them of the opportunities for survival. A disillusioned freedom fighter in an interview in 1970 expresses his frustration this way: “All we wanted was enough coarse rice and coarse cloth to live in comfort. But we never got those satisfactions of freedom . . . We freed ourselves from the hands of foreigners. But now we can’t free ourselves from our own brothers in our own country” (Chatterjee, “Introduction - Wages of Freedom: Fifty Years of the Indian Nation-State” 3). The enemy within in postcolonial India is difficult to fight against for the people at the bottom of caste/class hierarchy. Even the basic requirements such as food, clothes and shelter do not become a priority of the ruling elites in a democratic nation. *Sangati*’s community of women can’t dream of eating a full meal, “Whether we vote or not, those who drink kanji

continue to drink kanji and those who eat rice continue to eat rice” (Bama, *Sangati* 100). Besides connecting the dates of Gandhi’s murder and her daughter’s wedding, Paatti also recalls that Pathima’s mother’s wedding happened when there was a famine. So, the fact that “real rice” was served at the wedding is a big deal. Paatti’s life has seen other famines as well. Again, Bama demonstrates that subaltern history is different from high caste history.

The system of election and the rhetoric of people’s representation remain a mere play of elite power transactions in which the marginalized people do not see any meaningful significance for their life. They do not believe that the election will improve their living conditions. Dalit women’s votes are exchanged for a mere car ride to and from the voting stations or for a few rupees. A Dalit woman reflects on why the current voting system does not make a difference in their lives:

Whether it is Rama who rules, or Ravana, what does it matter? Our situation is always the same. I wouldn’t have even gone to cast my vote. It was only because of that macchaan Malayandi that I went in the first place. He gave me a couple of rupees and told me to put a stamp in some picture or the other. I stood in the queue and went in, but completely forgot which picture he told me to stamp. So then I decided on my own to put one stamp on the cycle and one on the elephant picture. Then I bought myself some *mocchai payiru* with the two rupees he gave me. (*Sangati* 99)

Election, as one of the major features of liberal democracy to represent people’s voices, becomes trivial, meaningless show of the powerful people to Dalit women. They don’t have any faith in the election, “Who is going to change the writing on our foreheads? All

that happens is that we lose a day's work because of this voting business" (*Sangati* 98). Those who are wealthy and powerful control everything. The political parties which claim to address people's problems do not seem to dispel the caste prejudice and its manifestations of pro-upper caste alliances, "Nowadays even the landlords have changed their style. They used to belong to all sorts of different parties. Now, it seems one of them, a Naidu, that is, has started a new party, and they've all joined them" (*Sangati* 102). By representing the nationalist democratic institutions and their colonial mindset through Dalit women's everyday experiences Bama questions the ethical ground of electoral processes and the claim of representation in postcolonial India.

Ambedkar appears in Bama's narrative as bringing some hope for the Dalits. He is the leader Dalits consider their own. If Ambedkar's demand for ensuring the separate Dalit electorates in the Indian constitution had been approved, it could possibly have given an opportunity to Dalit people to elect someone from their own caste/community to represent them. Unfortunately, Gandhi's opposition extirpated Ambedkar's proposal, and the possibility of separate Dalit electorates. What Bama presents in *Sangati* is an instance of the limitations of the bourgeois democracy in which the powerful get more powerful and the oppressed get further estranged from access to political opportunities. The conceptual flaw of the Indian nationalist intellectuals and their upper caste exclusive essentialist manipulation of the national character leaves the cultural/spiritual and

historical/political location of “Dalitbahujan”²⁴ people completely out of its discursive paradigm. The narrator muses:

The women are in a worse position. More than half never go and vote. Given how many women there are altogether, there is so much we could achieve. We could demand the rights that are due to us. We could fling away the beggarly coins the party workers bother to give us when they ask us to vote for them, and elect an MLA from our own community. We could demonstrate our own strength through political power. (*Sangati* 103)

Here, Bama reflects on what Ambedkar envisioned as some of the ways through which Dalit people could seek their meaningful representation in the postcolonial political system and strengthen their political power. Perhaps, that will enable the Dalit representatives to raise their voice more powerfully and assert their presence. Aloysius argues, “At its worst, Indian nationalism is false consciousness as far as the masses are concerned, and at its best, it is a genuine bourgeois democratic revolution” (*Nationalism without a Nation in India* 96). This false consciousness continues giving false hope rather than true freedom and equality for the subalterns. Challenging the limits of this bourgeois nationalist consciousness, Bama reconstructs the Dalit women’s identity with the recognition of their unique socio-political location, in which they must confront specific caste and gender oppressions.

²⁴Kancha Ilaiah coins the term “Dalitbahujan” to make a distinction between the Dalits and other suppressed classed which are listed as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Other Suppressed Castes (OBCs) in the Indian constitution.

The postcolonial nation that is built on the high caste norms is deeply patriarchal. Bama's text shows how patriarchy affects high caste women differently from Dalit women whose bodies are treated as the sites for upper caste men to abuse. There are many instances in which Dalit women suffer the brute violence of high caste men. Paatti warns Pathima to be careful while collecting firewood, "women should never come on their own to these parts. If upper caste fellows clap eyes on you, you are finished. They will drag you off and rape you, that's for sure" (*Sangati* 8). Mariamma nearly escapes a high caste man's attempt to molest her. She reports it to her friends who suggest to her to keep quiet because they know that the upper caste man would never be found guilty. The village committee (all men) does not believe her story and decides to punish Mariamma for bringing "disgrace" to the village. Bama also exposes the deep-rooted fear of the lower caste people that voicing complaint against the high caste men might start a riot and they would have to pay a heavy price for "being so insolent" (*Sangati* 25). Dalit men cannot go against high caste men even though they know that they and their women are treated unfairly because they are fully dependent on the high caste men for their survival. What they see is a system in place in which Dalit men are reduced to mere muscles only fit for doing hard labour in the high castes' fields. Bama shows that a respectable space in the dominant socio-political structure for the lower caste people seems to be an impossibility because it is defined and controlled by rigid high caste norms.

Dalit men in Bama's textual world represent patriarchy which is not much different from the high caste patriarchy, but their masculinity is not considered as equal to that of the high caste men. Bama demonstrates that Dalit masculinity is quite different from high caste masculinity because the Dalit men are not considered equal to high caste

men in postcolonial India. Bama shows that Dalit men's violent abuse of Dalit women in *Sangati* is, perhaps because they are treated so horribly in the upper caste realms and vent their rage on Dalit women. Most of the Dalit literary theoretical works seem to take caste as the problematic beginning and the Dalit women's doubly marginalized position as the most vulnerable position in South Asian socio-political and discursive framework. Dalit masculinity has been criticized for its patriarchal undertones and its lack of acknowledgement that the liberation of Dalit women from all sorts of Dalit patriarchy is crucial to the liberation of Dalit people. Dalit male writers seem to ignore Dalit women's uniquely marginalized position and subsume it within the larger Dalit liberation movement. Anandita Pan observes that the Dalit male writers, "voicing a tremendous struggle to establish the dalit subject in its agential form emerging out of "authentic" experiences of untouchability, represented dalit women in conventional victimised forms" (Pan, "Embracing Difference: Towards a Standpoint Praxis in Dalit Feminism" 39). Bama's text exposes the challenges that the Dalit women face from within the Dalit patriarchy and its oppressive authority, which in many ways, replicates the high caste patriarchy. A Dalit woman's body becomes a site of conflicts both to the upper caste and Dalit men. The control of Dalit women's body is central to both upper caste and Dalit patriarchy. There are a number of instances in *Sangati* where Dalit women are abused by Dalit men. We hear Dalit women talking about their men not helping around household chores even though they have both worked in the fields equally. We see that many Dalit women are physically and verbally abused by their men at their homes and in the fields. Paatti's daughter is beaten horribly (10), Mariamma suffers "blows and kicks and beatings every day" (42) by her husband, Thaayi's husband beats "her up again and again

with the belt from his waist” (42), and Pathima sees Raakkamma’s husband dragging her by her hair and kicking her (61). Dalit men are no exceptions to the high caste men in terms of how they treat women. Anand Teltumbde argues that the Dalit women “suffer from even more violent versions of patriarchy than upper caste women, precisely because of the relative powerlessness of Dalit men, which Dalit men tend to compensate for by lording it over their women” (“Forward: Dalits, Dalit Women and the Indian State” 53). Teltumbde echoes the complexities of Dalit men’s position in the postcolonial India which has produced various layers of caste/gender hierarchies that reverberate in many ways in the postcolonial state that is foregrounded on the high caste men’s assumed superiority.

Bama recognizes the nodes of powerlessness of Dalit men and their inability to claim their masculinity in her portrayal of Dalit men’s unpredictably violent behaviour towards Dalit women. She invites the readers to recognize Dalit men’s diminished masculinity in their everyday verbal and physical assaults targeted at their women folk probably underscoring a need to look at Dalit males’ position differently in a casteist society. The narrative of the male superiority is not only transmitted in the myths and folkloric tradition that forms the bedrock of how people think about caste and gender, but also in the lived realities within the four walls of the house. The narrator recalls her childhood experience of how her grandmother used to treat her:

She cared for grandsons much more than she cared for us. If she brought anything home when she returned from work, it was always the grandsons she called first. If she brought cucumbers, she scooped out all the seeds with her fingernails, since she had no teeth, and gave them the remaining fruit. If she brought mangoes, we

only got the skin, the stones and such; she gave best pieces of fruit to the boys.

(*Sangati* 7–8)

Even though Dalit women recognize caste discrimination and their subordinate position in society they are inescapably imprisoned within the prescribed gender inferiority. They are forced to yield to the prescribed “norms” that perpetuate the notion that women must accept men’s cruelty rather than confront it because they are created inferior and are “unable” to do so. Paatti’s inability to protect her daughter from her son-in-law’s innumerable violent abuses attests to the fact that men not only have power to control what happens in the family but also the bodies of their women. Paatti responds to the narrator’s question on why she did not do anything to stop her son-in-law’s brutal attacks:

When a man is hitting out like that, can a woman go and pull him away? And was she born alongside four or five brothers who could have helped her? There was not a soul to support her or speak for her. Not even her own father. Who was there to question the man? Even if the bystanders had tried to spot him, he would have shouted at all of them, “she is my wife, I can beat her or even kill her if I want.”

Tell me who could have stopped him? (*Sangati* 10–11)

When we look at this narrative, we see how vulnerable and meaningless Dalit women’s status is in Dalit households. It is the Dalit male who controls Dalit women’s bodies, minds, and movements at home. He sets the boundaries for his women who are already at the edge of caste/gender structure. Bama shows that Dalit women must confront their men at home and high caste men outside in order to pave their way to equality and assert their identity.

In the postcolonial India only the high caste men deserve to enjoy male privilege and power. All the lower castes and the Dalit men must submit to the high caste men for various economic and political reasons. Bama reminds us that to read Dalit masculinity as similar to the high caste masculinity could be a serious mistake as Dalit men are deprived of the opportunities to entertain their sense of maleness in South Asian society. Dalit male is constructed as a meaningless, nameless, and powerless man in the high caste hegemonic discourse. Dalit man is represented as an effeminate male unable to exercise masculine power and is therefore a reduced and humiliated man. However, Bama has explicitly condemned Dalit men's injustice against Dalit women and their patriarchal mindsets, "A woman's body, mind, feelings, words and deeds, and her entire life are all under his control and domination. And we too have accepted what they want us to believe—that this is actually the right way, that our happiness lies in being enslaved to men" (*Sangati* 67). Though Dalit men are oppressive exploiters of Dalit women as they are not different from the upper caste men in terms of how they perceive their women as their property, "dalit men are reproducing the same mechanisms against their women which their high caste adversaries had used to dominate them" (Pan, "Embracing Difference: Towards a Standpoint Praxis in Dalit Feminism" 35). Bama offers a different perspective to understand these men's dented self-worth. Their historical, political, and material conditions fueled by the religio-cultural caste ordinances need to be considered seriously to understand Dalit men's actual location in South Asia. Dalit masculinity in this sense invites a totally different analysis than the one based on the conventional approach. The exploration and investigation of Dalit men's deeply fractured sense of maleness and its various dimensions are a lack in Dalit intellectual/discursive domain.

Bama demonstrates that because Dalit men are trapped in an economic dependency on the upper caste men, they are vulnerable, and their self-respect is compromised. What the narrator in *Sangati* sees in the everyday cruelty of the Dalit men to their women is a way of exerting their male ego that gets shattered outside their community. The frustration of being an effeminate male in the fields of the upper caste people, and their wounded ego become powerful in front of their women. The narrator seems to be sympathetic to the Dalit men as they are inescapably trapped within the caste/class structure that does not recognize all men as equal. The postcolonial nation demonizes and dispossesses them. The narrator identifies Dalit men's behaviour in postcolonial India this way:

Nowadays when I reflect on how the men in our streets went about drinking and beating their wives, I wonder whether all that violence was because there was nowhere else for them to exert their male pride or to show off their authority. All that suppressed anger was vented when they came home and beat up their wives to a pulp. (*Sangati* 65)

Dalit men are taken as a threat to the upper caste masculinity and are therefore caste rules are consigned to control them. They must be rendered powerless by ensuring that Dalit men do not get access to the upper caste women and be obedient to the upper caste men. Uma Chakravarti argues that "The lower caste male whose sexuality is a threat to upper caste purity has to be institutionally prevented from having sexual access to women of the higher castes so women must be carefully guarded" ("Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State" 579). In a similar fashion V. Geetha points out that the upper caste men taunt Dalit men about "their masculinity and claim that dalit men can never hope to protect their women, who . . . are considered 'easy

prey' by upper caste men" (108). The economic dependence of Dalit men to the upper caste men and their constant denigration and emasculation transmit an uncontrollable anger and violent behaviour when the Dalit women confront and protest against the way their men behave. Postcolonial India continues to effeminize the Dalit men and undermines their claim to equal share and participation in nation building.

Cultural construction of nationhood as a form of social and textual affiliation has specific histories and meanings in different political languages. "The complex strategies of cultural identifications and the discursive practices that function in the name of 'the people' or 'the nation' and make them the immanent subjects of a range of social and literary narratives" (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 140), but these subjects are specifically chosen and categorized to reflect the power dynamics of the nation. In this kind of nationalist strategic metrics, Dalit people are deliberately excluded from that power dynamic and the issues of their subjecthood remain blurred. Bama breaks this hegemonic narrative boundary and brings the Dalit women's voice to the center of literary debate. Her oppositional voice interrogates the dominant narratives of the national and the cultural forces that assume no alternative space for imagination. What Indian nationalist discourse does to the lower caste people in reality is to institutionalize a fear for not being submissive, obedient and servile. Those who choose to counter this strategy are demonized and silenced. Bama's narrative is constructed against this false and inhuman notion of cultural superiority that the lower caste people must remain enclosed within the prescribed notions of bourgeois upper caste discursive limit. Though Dalit women have been the bearers of dehumanization not only in the everyday life but also in the dominant literary representations, Bama's characters are not mute. They

confront discrimination and loudly vocalize against injustice. She invites Dalit women to fight back, “to bounce like a ball that has been hit became my, and not to curl up and collapse because of the blow” (*Sangati* vi). Bama shows that Dalit women must act in order to claim their rights.

The postcolonial Indian nation state, which is imagined to be the representative of all of its diverse communities, disavows the Dalit people and disconnects them from the nationalist imperative. Bama questions the refusal of the nationalist ideologues to address the caste question as one of the major elements of the nation building. Dalit people’s discursive and religio-political disavowal signify the high caste elites’ complicity in the institutionalization of state violence against Dalits and other marginalized communities. The Dalit world in *Sangati*, is isolated not only from the high caste village, but also from the state apparatuses which are controlled by the high caste men. The hopes of these communities are shattered as they experience further estrangement from the social/political/economic institutions that are supposed to safeguard the masses. The emergence of the new nation did not in fact produce new possibilities but refashioned the same old dialectic that continued the hegemonic narrative built on the hierarchies of caste, class, and gender. In an orchestrated speculation of the invention of the Indian modernism by the postcolonial elites, the upper caste people are presented as the true representatives and the benefactors of the new nation and the lower castes and minorities as the “antinationalists” who bring shame to the nation. Dalits become stateless. The erasure of Dalits and minorities continues. Because of the lack of access to economic resources poverty becomes an acceptable norm in the Dalit communities. Little children are forced to work in the fields, factories, and other dangerous work settings. They are

abused on a daily basis, and cut off from their basic rights of education, family, childhood. The postcolonial India abandons its children, not the Rushdian “midnight children” who are born at the city hospital beds with modern facilities, but the children who are born in the fields and homes and with the help of the women such as Paatti without any glimpse of modern hospitals. Paatti attends every childbirth in the Dalit community. She does the job of delivering the babies with her own knowledge and experience. Modern technology and education have not reached the Dalit basti. These issues are not the priorities of the state institutions. The dominant narrative consistently hides these anomalies of the new nation whereas Bama dares to break that uneasy silencing of the other side of the nation, which is hungry, powerless, and stateless.

How can the historically muted Dalit women speak for themselves, and be represented in the postcolonial literary canon? Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak argues that “In seeking to learn to speak to . . . the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman, the postcolonial intellectual systematically unlearns’ female privilege. This systematic unlearning involves learning to critique postcolonial discourse with the best tool it can provide and not simply substituting the lost figure of the colonized” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 91). Spivak’s invitation to the postcolonial intellectuals to unlearn in order to understand and represent the subaltern subject is important. However, this unlearning has not incorporated the caste/class and its enmeshed presence in all spheres of South Asian societies. Instead, the postcolonial intellectuals and the institutions continue to highlight the conventional colonizer-colonized binary that completely excludes the most compelling issues that are produced by the caste/class and gender hierarchies, focusing instead on issues such as loss of language and culture due to colonization. Bama’s text

reproduces the moments that suggest various realistic nodes which are predicated upon the internal divide between the upper caste versus lower caste and the narratives of atrocity and the trivialization of Dalit cultural representation. Or in other words, after independence from the British rule the colonized, now become the internal colonizer becomes even stronger with a full control and force of state institutions and continues to deny the lower caste presence in the making of the new nation.

The mainstream writing represents the lower caste characters as types depicting them as victims who deserve readers' sympathy. Bama confronts the perpetual denigration of Dalit people in the dominant narratives and critically engages with "a realism that revises the portrayal of characters either as literary types or binary opposites and represents Dalits as vocal and assertive characters located in a specific social context" (Satyanarayana 19). She calls for a renewed narrative perspective in which Dalit women's rebellion and support to each other in their communities could be a threat to the dominant hegemonic literary mode that valorizes the Brahminic tradition and maintains the perpetration of caste/gender subordination. The narrative voice in *Sangati* calls Dalit women for an awareness of their trivialized location in order to get up and fight back. The narrator responds to her mother's question on "what can we poor women do?"

It is by repeating that to us that they have made us as useless as rotten eggs.

Nowadays women take up all sorts of responsibilities. But just as they fooled us and took away our rights within our homes, they have also marginalized us in the world outside. But now, generation by generation we must start thinking for ourselves, taking decisions, and daring to act. Don't we sharpen and renew a

rusted sickle? Just like that, we must sharpen our minds and learn to live with self-respect. (*Sangati* 104)

Bama shows that Dalit women understand their marginalized position within and outside their homes. They refuse to be passive recipients of humiliation and various forms of abuses. There are many instances of discrimination and abuses in which Dalit women strongly confront their abusers. For instance, Raakkamma fights back her husband's physical abuses with the barrage of verbal obscenities to escape his violence. The subaltern women speak loudly and clearly against the way they are treated and the way they are identified, but their challenge to the established notions of identity is silenced by the mainstream narrative. While the narrator underscores that the present remains bad in terms of political (un)representation for Dalit men and women, and the narrator finds it hard to rent a place even though she can pay for it, while land (111) and schooling (118) are still denied to them, the narrator ends with a resolve that they must fight for what they deserve.

Thus, Bama's text demonstrates that postcolonial India and its nationalist narratives consistently fail to represent Dalit people. More specifically, her text shows that Dalit women bear the burden of triple jeopardy and refuse to be a part of the Brahminic hegemonic ideology that perpetuates a permanent system of segregation based on the purity-pollution doctrine in which Dalit women occupy the lowest status. Bama's and her fellow women's lived experiences again and again portray the failure of the Indian dominant system of governance and emphasize the need to redefine the one-dimensional nationalist historiography and the discursive domains that limit access to the marginalized people. She sees the possibility of Dalit women's liberation only when they

understand their subjugated position and fight against all kinds of injustice perpetrated by the casteist society. Bama argues that the reconstruction and representation of Dalit women's self must be based on the alternative narrative framework which seeks to empower Dalit women and represent their subjectivity. Bama's alternative framework transgresses the postcolonial binary to represent the victims of postcolonial Indian state in their full dignity as human beings with agency who fight against this oppressive state and expose its sham of equality and inclusivity for all.

CHAPTER THREE

Ambedkarite Theatre as a Tool of Liberation in Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Hindu*

In the previous chapter, I explored how Bama's text demonstrated postcolonial India's failure to address the triply oppressed conditions of Dalit women. Bama maintained that the dominant literary theories failed to understand the intersectionality of caste and gender and therefore could not represent Dalit women's marginality. Bama's text showed that only by dismantling the propagation of high caste/class elites' version of Hindutva India and locating caste and gender at the centre of literary investigation can we understand and address Dalit women's condition.

In this chapter, I analyze how Limbale's work transcends the paradigm of postcolonial theory's colonizer/colonized binary by showing that India's independence from the British colonizer meant nothing for Dalit and other minority groups. Further, as in Bama's work, Limbale shows that the erstwhile colonized, who celebrates their freedom from the British is the new colonizer, depriving Dalits of their basic human rights. His work also challenges the ways in which the postcolonial India's dominant literary/political discourse (mis)represents Dalits and suggests a different aesthetic perspective which recognizes the lived experiences of Dalits and their struggle against high caste/class subjugation. This chapter explores Limbale's portrayal of Dalit struggle to escape this yoke of internal colonization at the hands of high caste/class Indians.

Limbale confronts the nationalist and postcolonial literary establishments by engendering a caste lens as the central tool to investigate the South Asian literature and

society. He observes that the traditional literary aesthetics fails to address the social realities of the South Asian societies and therefore the Dalit writers should “insist on the need for a new and distinct aesthetic for their literature—an aesthetic that is life-affirming and realistic” (*Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations* 19). Like the other Dalit writers, Limbale is influenced by Ambedkar’s work, which recognizes the Brahminic caste system as the major hindrance to the liberation of Dalits and other lower caste people in South Asian societies. Limbale questions the dominant literary traditions that either obliterate the Dalit presence in the socio-political activities or present them as passive characters without their own voice. He suggests that Dalit literature is an alternative literary/theoretical paradigm which represents the voice of the historically marginalized people and their cultural consciousness which the mainstream literature deliberately erased. For Limbale, Dalit subalternity cannot be established in the conventional literary/political framework but in the recognition of caste system and its various implications in the South Asian societies.

Limbale’s novel, *Hindu* (2010) not only unveils the hypocrisy of deeply fractured Indian casteist society and its multipronged projections but also subverts the conventional approach to writing novels. According to its translator, Arun Mukherjee, *Hindu* “shatters many of the granted expectations that the universalized bourgeois reader has from this literary genre. *Hindu* is not based on excavations of the protagonist’s past memories, family conflict, growing-up pains, romance and heartbreak that are usual plotting device of the bourgeois novel” (“Introduction” xiv). It is a representation of a caste society and its deeply fractured psyche. *Hindu* revolves around the murder of a Dalit activist who challenges the orthodox Hindu society and incites the Dalit community to convert to

Buddhism through his Ambedkarite theatre. This novel does not develop the character of an individual protagonist and his revelations as in the conventional novels but presents the various characters of Dalit and high caste communities who have conflicts, contradictions, and confusions in their life. Defying the expectations of a bourgeois novel and its middle-class worldview, Limbale, similar to other Dalit writers, weaves the story of the whole community and engages with its everyday realities. Limbale's characters bear their caste names every time they appear in the narrative. It is important to understand that the caste names carry a lot of loads with them in South Asian society. A caste name tells the reader what privileges a particular person is entitled to because of her/his caste in the casteist Hindu society. Any work that ignores the gravity of the caste names and undermines the unique character of the South Asian societies cannot be considered a fair representation of South Asia. No other writers I have come across recognizes this reality and emphasizes the caste names as one of the strong markers of one's identity in South Asian societies. Though the institution of caste transcends all other modern institutions, such as monarchies, democracies, republics, constitutions, other legal, social, political entities, the conventional high caste literary works ignore this fact and universalize the characters as if caste does not matter. Why the mainstream South Asian writers ignore this reality may be because most of the conventional literature comes from the castes which have immensely benefitted from the caste system, and, because the caste system is so normalized and so subtle that a common person does not really notice the ugly face of caste in everyday life. Caste is normalized and to see its complexities we need to go beyond the superficial look of the caste merely as a last

name. Caste normality is viewed in relation to how racism is considered a norm²⁵ in the American society. Caste inequality is considered normal in South Asian society as it is an integral part of the Brahminic culture. The caste system bears the marks that look completely ordinary and natural to the common people in South Asia in which various forms of caste discriminations such as untouchability exist as a natural phenomenon because someone is born in the so-called lowest caste and as a result becomes an untouchable. Disavowing the high caste conventional writers' reluctance to incorporate the caste as a major component of one's identity in South Asia, Limbale investigates the subtlety of caste system and represents the caste names as the bearers of various historical/material conditions and the markers of various connotations in their everyday manifestations. The mainstream novels, whether in South Asia or abroad, according to Mukherjee, "create(s) a false universality and a fake intimacy by putting the reader on a first name basis with its characters, subtly implying that the caste, race, or religion of the characters do not matter" ("Introduction" xxi). By pushing the caste of the character to the liminal space, the dominant literary discourse creates a false image of a society which is deeply fractured by the caste system. Limbale understands his responsibility as a writer to recognize caste identity of his characters in the novel and uses their names with their caste names every time the characters appear in the scene, no matter how many times the character appears in the novel. The repetitions of the caste names remind the readers to understand the gravity of the caste names and their functions and remain aware of the

²⁵ *Critical Race Theory* examines how deeply ingrained is racism in American society and goes unnoticed and normal to ordinary people.

layers within the caste society. Limbale asks us to pay special attention to the caste indicators and the ways they are interwoven in the narrative structure. This chapter recognizes Limbale's desire to represent caste as it functions in the South Asian societies and uses the characters' names with their caste names every time they appear in the discussion.

Limbale's narrative portrays an Indian village, Achalpur, which is inhabited by the high caste people and the low caste Mahars and Mung, some of whom have taken on the political identity, Dalit. Dalit community is segregated from the high caste community and is outside the main village where the high caste community lives. Dalit community is not considered a part of the village by the high caste people. Achalpur is troubled by an Ambedkari street theatre, jalsa, led by a local Dalit youth, Tatya Kamble who is genuinely influenced by B.R. Ambedkar's philosophy. Confronting the tradition of his ancestors' tamasha, the traditional street theatre, Tatya Kamble leads the jalsa, redefines and reorganizes it with the help of Dalit youths to educate people of the Dalit community about the caste atrocities, and to appeal to them to understand the motives behind centuries of their suppression. At the centre of the conflict there is Tatya Kamble because the high caste people in the village have not accepted his ways to asserting the Dalit voice: "These days Achalpur has become famous for Tatya Kamble's jalsa. Many people now know it as jalsakar Tatya Kamble's village, which has raised many eyebrows. The villagers found it had to accept that their village was now known by a Mahar's name" (Limbale, *Hindu* 11). Tatya Kamble's campaign encapsulates the sentiment of the suppressed and stigmatized people and their desire to see themselves as dignified human beings. His jalsas subvert the conventional high caste heroes of the tamasha tradition and

presents Dalits as the speaking subjects, attracting not only the Dalits from the Achalpur village but also from various other villages, expanding the scope and the demand of the jalsa campaign. He challenges the hegemony of the Sanskrit textual tradition by writing his own plays around issues that have never been important in the traditional writing practices and performing them in the jalsas. Limbale's intertextualization of the jalsa plays in the novel demonstrates a deep-seated gulf between the one-dimensional textual tradition that silences the Dalits and the subaltern counter tradition that the jalsa plays invoke with the voices that have never been represented in the tamasha tradition. Tatya Kamble places Dalit issues at the centre of his plays and becomes the harbinger of hope for Dalits who have been subjected to the "discourse of pity" by the dominant literary/cultural domain for centuries.

Tatya Kamble seeks to dismantle the system of "slavery"²⁶ and claim the Dalit subjecthood in the Indian casteist society. Many Dalit scholars compare casteism with racism and take slavery as "a powerful metaphor for caste" (Paik 78). Tatya Kamble breaks the tradition of orthodox tamasha in which his ancestors used to perform the traditional plays, such as *Satyavan Savitri*, *Damajipant*, *Raja Harishchandra Taramati*, so on and so forth, that celebrate mythological kings and queens, the Hindu gods and

²⁶ Jotiba Phule elaborately explains Brahminic caste system as the system of slavery in his masterpiece *Gulamgiri, Slavery* (1873). B.R. Ambedkar, Anand Teltumbde, Kancha Alliah, G. Aloysius and many other Dalit scholars make analogies between caste system and slavery. One of the significant links of the caste system with slavery is the foundation of the Dalit Panthers Party in 1972 modelled on the Black Panthers Party of America to protect their fellow Dalits from violence and atrocities, and to confront their oppressors by adopting radical and violent means if necessary.

goddesses, and propagate the Brahminical world view. These traditional performance plays further elaborate the mythical stories of the classical Sanskrit texts, which are considered to be the “unchangeable” founding documents of Brahminical world view.

According to D. D. Nagaraj, what these texts strategically produce:

is a statement of the monolithic unity of all the three realms: lower castes have no dignity, their religiosity is a sham, and their right to entitlements is next to nothing. Such Brahminical positions were supported by the texts they created. It was a classic case of self-legitimation. The surest characteristic of the Brahmin sensibility is the belief that the texts are a substitute for a reality; that texts are the only reality, the rest is all illusion. (187)

The humiliation of Dalits and the justification of their worthlessness continue in the reproduction of the texts used in the tamasha tradition, even though, ironically, the performers were themselves of lower castes. Tatya Kamble’s ancestors were forced to continue the spectacle that dehumanized them and laughed at their own miseries through the Brahminic texts that designed the spectacle, in which the high caste permanently stands at the pedestal benefitting from the system that is often compared with slavery, as Nagaraj has rightly argued. For Tatya Kamble, the tamasha tradition that his ancestors carried on becomes a form of a modern slavery in which the Dalits are transposed as mere puppets who perform their own worthlessness to please the high caste people. The Brahminic law has created the worthlessness of the lower caste people, similar to that of Franz Fanon’s examination of the native people who are reduced to an insensible, evil force by the colonial power/discourse. Fanon argues:

The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. He is, let us dare to admit, the enemy of values, and in this sense he is the absolute evil. He is the corrosive element, destroying all that comes near him; he is the deforming element, disfiguring all that has to do with beauty or morality; he is the depository of maleficent powers, the unconscious and irretrievable instrument of blind forces. (41)

As Franz Fanon points out, the Euro-centric discourse reduces the colonized native people to the negation of values. In a similar way, the Brahminic tradition diminishes the Dalit basically to the position of a polluting evil force, as someone “who is mean, despicable, contemptible and sinful due to his deeds in his past life; he is seen as sorrowful in his life, poor, humiliated and without history, one whose ancestors could never hope to acquire respectability in either temples or scriptures” (Bagul 289). Tatya Kamble understands that it is impossible to gain equality within the narrow Brahminic world, and therefore, it must be dismantled. In order to unburden the humiliation, servitude and meaninglessness endured by Dalits from the dominant Hindu hegemony, the Dalits must subvert the ways they are degraded by the dominant literary discourse and produce a new lens to represent their subjectivities in a meaningful way. Tatya Kamble continues the family tradition in a novel way in jalsas, taking the opportunity to convert his energy to transfer not only an awareness against the caste discrimination but also to demonstrate his discontent against the high caste village leaders who unabashedly stand for caste brutality and continue to perpetrate violence against Dalits. Instead of performing tamasha for entertaining the high caste people, he transforms it into the powerful Ambedkari jalsa, awakening his community, which is oppressed and enclosed

within a narrow boundary of Achalpur village and its high caste inhabitants. Prabhakar Kavale, the son of the village headman, who murders Tatya Kamble, expresses his anger about the popularity of jalsa this way:

Tatya Kamble's grandfather's tamasha was good. His father's tamasha was good too. The village has always admired their artistic skills. They provided pure entertainment. And the village gave them bidagi in return. People laughed at the tamasha until their stomachs ached, gave them bakshish. Nowadays, gods and goddesses are abused in their jalsas. (Limbale, *Hindu* 39)

The high caste people take jalsas as a threat to their "tradition" of worship. What these jalsas do is critique various forms of discrimination that the high caste Hindus enforce through the authority of the religious books. Tatya Kamble's jalsa stirs the village with a new version of street theatre, infuriating the high caste Hindus:

Tatya Kamble's grandfather and father were true artists, but Tatya Kamble is an Ambedkarite propagandist. In the past Mahars used to dance in front of the wedding processions, but Tatya Kamble ended this tradition. He would not dance in front of a wedding procession. Before him who could have dared to say no to the village's command? (*Hindu* 39)

The jalsa becomes the central force that penetrates the upper caste realm and hurts their ego, further endangering their control over the untouchable community. Jalsa subverts Dalits' faith in the so-called eternal religion. Tatya Kamble replaces the traditional tamasha with the texts depicting Dalit life and placing their voice at the centre with the message of caste liberation through conversion. In one of the plays that Limbale intertextualizes in *Hindu*, Tatya Kamble shows the caged partridges oblivious of their

confinement and the possibility of their freedom from the cage, provoking the subjugated Dalits to revolt against the high caste supremacy. The partridges fear the call for freedom.

The Sutradhar, Mangesh Kamble enacting the role in the play, speaks:

Those who get accustomed to living in slavery begin to fear freedom. If a demand is made for freedom, they fear they will be harassed. The mind that does not have the strength to stand up against injustice is not really alive; it has been dead a long time ago. A human being with a dead mind is as good as dead. O corpses, wake up. (*Hindu* 48)

This incites the audience as they relate their enslaved condition and inability to fight against the injustice to the condition of partridges in the cage. The show of the pet partridges as the passive bearers of the imprisoned life in the cage without an ability to question their jailor indicates something subtle and meaningful to the audience. The hunter, Kabir Kamble enacting the role, speaks to the pet partridges, “Partridges, you are safe because you are in a cage . . . This cage was built by God. It is your fate to live in this cage” (*Hindu* 47). The Brahminic discourse invokes the Hindu gods in order to justify the subjugation and the discrimination against the lower caste people. The caste system has created a discourse in which Dalits are patronized, infantilized, and discriminated against. Even after India’s independence the postcolonial leaders continue to propagate the Brahminic world view in which Dalits remain at the bottom. For instance, in the eyes of Dalits, Gandhi patronized them with his euphemism “Harijan” with the intention of keeping the Dalits within the control of the high caste Hindus. Limbale exposes the failure of the leaders of the post-independence India to address the subaltern people and the ongoing colonization within. When the Sutradhar in the play

provokes the pet partridges to leave the cage as it symbolizes slavery, they respond: “We will be given freedom. We don’t have to revolt against God for that. He is the maker of this earth” (*Hindu* 47). Through this intertext, Limbale presents the reality that the way to liberation is difficult as slavery is deemed to be the fate of the Dalits and a revolt against it is considered to be the revolt against God. Taty Kamble understands this complexity and tries to unpack the inherent motive behind the high caste textual/cultural tradition. He attempts to dismantle the system that the Sanskrit texts propagate and maintain, as his progenitor Ambedkar had suggested, “If you wish to bring about the breach in the system, then you have got to apply the dynamite to the Vedas and the shastras, which deny any part to reason; to the Vedas and shastras, which deny any part to morality. You must destroy the religion of the shrutis and the smritis. Nothing else will avail” (Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* 303–04). Taty Kamble’s “dynamite” to break the caste system is the jalsas and their powerful challenge to the system through a discursive/political message disseminated in the form of the street plays.

Limbale not only demonstrates the postcolonial India’s internal slavery and the colonization of the Dalits through the jalsa intertexts but also the internal divide within the Dalit communities which jeopardizes the Dalit liberation movements. The pet partridges are manipulated and lured to capture and enslave the wild partridges. Limbale shows that there are Dalits in the society who become the puppets of the high caste people and work against the Dalit freedom movement. For instance, the narrator, Milind Kamble inhabits the two worlds. On the one hand, as a Dalit, he takes part in the Dalit movement and worships Ambedkar and Buddha, and on the other hand he craves for the company of people such as Manikchand and Gopichand who manipulate people for their

selfish ends playing as go between. Milind Kamble witnesses Tatya Kamble's murder and a Dalit woman's rape by Manikchand and Gopichand and knows every detail of how Sadanand Kamble is pawned to go against Dalits, but never dares to expose these realities. The play shows that the pet partridges are taken to the forest to attract the wild partridges. Pet partridges seem oblivious of their situation and work for the hunters. The Sutradhar concludes, "These pet partridges are traitors. They became pets to serve their selfish ends. They are being used to hunt down the wild partridges. We need to speak against these traitors who work as a tool for the enemy and put the whole jungle in danger" (*Hindu* 49). Perhaps, this analogy becomes too complex for the uneducated, older generation of Dalit audience to understand its meaning and implications and they become restless during the performance. However, Limbale uses this intertext as a strong message to awaken the Dalit community, especially the Dalit youths who have the power and possibility to bring about a social/political transformation. Limbale envisions that this transformation could be possible perhaps through the milder form of revolution enhanced and backed up by the education and awareness about the human values and the dignity of life based on equality. Tatya Kamble's jalsas constitute an element that constructs the Dalit subjectivity by subverting the discourse that dehumanizes them.

Jalsa brings anxieties and feelings of insecurity to the high caste people because they see that Tatya Kamble and his jalsa discourse become popular among the Dalit communities. These new developments of jalsa create a new subaltern discourse which puts the downtrodden people and their voice at the centre interrogating the Brahminic cultural/religious symbols as the enemies of the Dalits. The fear that this new discourse can dismantle old caste order and disconnect the Dalits from the high caste control

increases as the high caste villagers see the uncompromising Tatya Kamble and his troupe of Dalit youths unabashedly campaigning for the Dalit assertion not only in Achalpur but also in many other surrounding villages. The high caste people fear that this campaign produces a different discourse that challenges not only the viewpoints of the traditional Sanskrit texts but also the thousands of year-old caste dynamics that has profited them. Dalits could claim equality and refuse working for the high caste people. While for the Dalits, jalsa brings hope and inspirations to claim their subjectivity and motivate them for their liberation, at the same time, it shakes and shatters the local Hindu religio-cultural-political institution that stems from the centuries old Brahminic philosophical doctrine of discriminating and humiliating people who are presented as the bringers of “pollution”. As the jalsa’s popularity increases in the Dalit community outside the high caste settlement of Achalpur, the high caste people’s fear translates into making a unanimous decision to exterminate their enemy, Tatya Kamble, and put an end to his jalsa: “those who challenge the religion must be cut into pieces. . . dalits must be annihilated” (Limbale, *Hindu* 42). Tatya Kamble’s nuanced and creative energy translated through jalsa pokes holes into the caste-ridden psyche of the high caste people, bringing the lower caste people together to fight against the high caste suppression. The high caste settlement burns with rage at the jalsa innovation. Dalits’ claim for their subjectivity is taken as the challenge to their tradition by the high caste people because they are not supposed to go against the dictate of the high caste people. The high caste men are unhappy as the Dalit Mahars have dared to go against the tamasha tradition. Narendra Patil’s address to a large crowd of savarnas unmasks the crux of the outrage of the high caste people:

The government pampers the dalits. That's why they have become insolent.

Nobody gives a damn for the savarnas. We have become like stepchildren. Today the Mahars have refused to perform their traditional village duties. Tomorrow the Mangs will follow suit. How will the village function in such circumstances?

Tatya Kamble came from a family of tamasha performers who had danced in village functions and weddings for generations. But Tatya Kamble stopped dancing in village events. The Mahars didn't dance even in the wedding procession of Prabhakar Kavle, the village patil's son. They also stopped asking for bidagi, the payment they received for dancing. This is an insult to the village.

(*Hindu* 28–29)

Though there is not much the postcolonial government has done for the Dalits, the high caste people persistently denounce even programs such as reservation for the Dalits for certain political positions and government jobs and consider that these programs are used to break the traditional caste relationship, for which Ambedkar vehemently fought in the Constituent Assembly and many other political/discursive forums. The postcolonial India continues to undermine the idea of fair representation and equal share of the Dalits in the state institutions. *Hindu* highlights how the high caste people monopolize resources and dispossess the Dalits from the social/political spaces. Narendra Patil expresses the dissatisfaction of the high caste people over Dalits' assertion of their identity. The deputy sarpanch, Narendra Patil who is supposed to implement fair rules and practices in the village of a postcolonial democratic country undermines the Dalits' rights to participate in the social/political affairs and publicly condemns the Dalits and diminishes them to inferiority, "They must serve us and feel obliged for whatever we give them" (*Hindu* 43).

The high caste men think that the Dalits are not respectful to the savarnas because of the little opportunities they get from the government. The gestures of the Dalits' awakening and the self-assertions are not acceptable to the high caste people. Limbale exposes the high caste people's frustration and anger through the subtle observations of the public gatherings and meetings held to discuss the village issues in which the Dalits have no share. Furthermore, the villagers²⁷ hear the talk of Tatya Kamble's plan to stand for the post of village sarpanch, the leader, in the coming election, increasing their fear of losing control over the village administration to a Dalit. By exterminating Tatya Kamble, the villagers consider that they could not only finish off one of the strongest and influential Dalit youth activists but also put the dreams of Dalit liberation to an end. The postcolonial India has not taught the high caste people to accept the self-respect and identity of the Dalits.

Tatya Kamble's campaign generates an upheaval in Achalpur village. The villagers are angry and confrontational. While the upper caste people are burning with rage against Dalit intransigence, Tatya Kamble delivers a powerful speech at a program where the community has gathered to celebrate Ambedkar's conversion day, which is sacred to Dalits. Tatya Kamble challenges the Brahminic world view and the status quo that suppresses his community under the *Shastric* laws, laws of the scriptures. Before he is trapped and murdered cold bloodedly as per the plan hatched inside the local Mahadev temple, Tatya Kamble incites the Mahar community to convert to Buddhism in a program

²⁷ Villagers include only the upper caste people in this context because Dalits are not included as an inclusive part of the village as they are not only physically outside the upper caste settlement but also are out of the socio-political domain.

organized on the 14th of October, commemorating the day on which Ambedkar together with half a million Dalits converted to Buddhism in 1956. Marking this significant day for Dalits, Tatya Kamble captivates the audience in his full-fledged condemnation of the caste system:

Why do you stay in a religion that does not allow you to enter the temple? Why do you stay in a religion that does not acknowledge your humanity? Why do you stay in a religion that does not allow you even water? A religion that forbids the treatment of humans as humans is not a religion but naked domination. A religion in which touching of unclean animals is permitted but touching of humans prohibited is not a religion but insanity. A religion that tells a group of human beings to not get education, not amass wealth, not carry arms is not a religion but a mockery of human values. (*Hindu* 50–51)

There is a strong imprint of Ambedkar's critique of Hinduism and caste system on Tatya Kamble's political consciousness. Tatya Kamble reverberates Ambedkar's critique of the Hindu religion and its incompatibility with the basic tenets of modern society. Ambedkar outlines:

Three factors are required for the uplift of an individual. They are: Sympathy, Equality, and Liberty. . . Can you say by experience that any of these factors exist for you in Hinduism? A religion in which man's human behaviour with man is prohibited, is not religion, but a display of force. A religion which does not recognize a man as man, is not a religion, but a disease. A religion in which the touch of animals is permitted, but the touch of human beings is prohibited, is not a religion but a mockery. A religion which precludes some classes from education,

forbids them to accumulate wealth and to bear arms, is not a religion but a mockery of human beings. A religion that compels the ignorant to be ignorant, and the poor to be poor, is not a religion but a punishment. (qtd. in Kumar 316)

In fact, Ambedkar's thought can be considered as the "pre-text" of all contemporary dalit literature" (*Postcolonialism: My Living* 45) according to Mukherjee. In *Hindu*, on the one hand, Limbale unpacks some of the important philosophical, religious, and the cultural connotations the word Hindu carries, and on the other hand, subverts its central tenets and its religious load with an alternative aesthetic perspective that emerges from the people who are born with the stigma of untouchability and are castigated as the Other within the Hindu religion. Limbale follows Ambedkar's footprints in interpreting Hinduism as antagonistic to equality and liberation from the imprisonment of caste barriers. Jalsakar Tatya Kamble's final speech in *Hindu* recalls Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism with hundreds of thousands of untouchables in which he fulfilled his commitment to not die as a Hindu: "I had the misfortune of being born as an Untouchable. However, it is not my fault; but I will not die as a Hindu, for this is in my power" (Ambedkar 195). The jalsas translate Ambedkar's conclusion that there is nothing that the Dalits can do to liberate themselves from the stigma of caste discrimination if they remain within the Hindu religion.

Limbale's literary world stems from his experience as an "untouchable" man in a segregated village of Maharashtra, India. For Limbale, it is not the canonical writers and their literary ingredients that provide input to his literary writing, but the everyday humiliation of himself and his fellowmen in the casteist Indian society. The representation of Dalits' everyday realities in Dalit writers' literary works is often

ridiculed and categorized as “unliterary” and “unsophisticated” in the mainstream literary establishment. Even the Marxists who claim to liberate people from all sorts of discrimination seem to possess a condescending attitude towards Dalit literature. Indian Marxists are criticized for ignoring the caste system and its various layers in South Asian societies, because as Ambedkar observes, “Caste system is not merely a division of labour. It is also a division of labourers” (Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* 234). Therefore, merely looking for the labourer class as a category without considering the divide among labourers along the caste lines is considered a serious flaw in Indian Marxism. Limbale points out that “the social status of the exploited savarna and the exploited Dalit is not identical. The social divide between a Brahman worker and a Dalit worker should be kept in mind” (*Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations* 63). While the Marxists ignore the division of labourers, Dalit literature marks this inequality and the stigma caused by the caste system as the central elements of its literary aesthetics. Limbale argues that it is wrong to equate the Dalit consciousness with the class consciousness, “Class-consciousness and Dalit consciousness are different. Dalit consciousness militates against unity” (qtd. in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations* 76). The Marxists are criticized for having overlooked the complexities within the caste lines and the productions of various classes within the castes. They “failed to theorize the specificity of caste and see the importance of giving a programme of struggle for workers and peasants on caste issues” (Omvedt 176). The realistic portrayals of Dalit experience do not seem to qualify for the category of “standard” literature in the eyes of the Indian Marxists. A Marxist critic, Namwar Singh reportedly said, “What we need to examine is

whether Dalit writers have the imaginative creativity that is a must for writing literature. Dalit writers give no importance to imaginative creativity and only present the lived reality” (qtd. in Mukherjee, *Postcolonialism: My Living* 47). Because the life Limbale sees is full of such elements that the master narratives despise, including the Marxists, he chooses to make the “dirt” of everyday life as his literary weapon that dares to penetrate the dominant literature and its complacency towards the ongoing plight of Dalit community.

What Limbale challenges is the demand of aesthetic sophistication that tends to build not upon the unspeakable horrors of the caste system, which Limbale calls “social terrorism” (*Hindu* xi) and the ongoing silencing of Dalits, but on the imaginary world that distances one from the historical, political and material conditions that surround life. Limbale, in his critical work, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (2004), slams the high caste literary aesthetics that claims to provide an aesthetic pleasure with the traditional approach referred to as “Brahmananda Sahodarananda”, comprising three basic principles—Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram (Truth, Goodness, Beauty). The ideal world envisioned and represented in the dominant Indian literature is but a denial of the real world of the Dalit experience. Limbale believes that these three traditional concepts “are the fabrications used to divide and exploit ordinary people. In fact, the aesthetic concept of “Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram” is the selfish mechanism of upper caste Hindu society” (*Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations* 21), which needs to be replaced by the realistic approach in which “literary value is embedded in its social value” (*Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations* 20). In other words, Dalit literature stems from the

historical material condition and socio-political circumstances of Dalit people in which they are dehumanized and suppressed. Therefore, it has a strong revolutionary message. Limbale points out that Dalit literature “artistically portrays sorrows, tribulations, degradations, ridicules, and poverty endured by dalits. This literature is but a lofty image of grief” (*Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations* 30). Similarly, B. Krishnappa reminds us that “it is inappropriate to look for refinement in a movement’s revolutionary literature . . . Refinement cannot be the mainstay of a literature that has revolution and change as its goals” (107). What Dalit literature explores is but the tiny bits of everyday suffering of the lowest of the low people and their desire to see themselves as human beings. Dalit literature is a literature of the dispossessed; therefore, it has a strong and crude language that may not be acceptable to the “prestigious” mainstream writers. Chinua Achebe illuminates that “strong language is in the very nature of the dialogue between dispossession and its rebuttal. The two sides never see the world in the same light” (Achebe 77). What Dalit writers see, and experience is far removed from the eyes of the mainstream upper caste writers who render Dalits invisible in high caste literature. By challenging the dominant traditional literature that has ignored the life of the people at the margin for centuries, Limbale attempts to find a space in which the silenced and disregarded subalterns find their voice. Limbale unpacks the singularity of the South Asian literature that ignores the subject positions of Dalits and enunciates a different cultural position that envisages a plural, fractured, and highly discriminatory South Asian casteist society.

Limbale’s narrative portrays the complex Hindu-dalit adversarial relationship and its everyday manifestations through his portrayal of the microcosm of the high caste/Dalit

world at the onset of the pro-Hindutva religious/political backdrop of the 1990s with the emergence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its leader Narendra Modi. *Hindu* incorporates many of the actual incidents of atrocities against Dalits and other minorities that have been everyday realities of contemporary India in which not only the high caste elites but also the government persistently attempt to silence the subaltern voice. Though Ambedkar's ideology continues to shake the dominant discourse and produce its strong followers, the caste discrimination persists and becomes even stronger under the current pro-Hindutva BJP government, which is intolerant of the publication and dissemination of Dalit perspectives and has adopted an antagonist role in interfering at the universities and harassing and arresting Dalit scholars/writers on an ongoing basis. Against this background of the ascendant Hindutva forces, Limbale's narrative in *Hindu* dissects some of the issues that emerge in the 1990s and early 2000s and continue to trouble the postcolonial India, whose Constitution defines it as a secular democratic republic. Limbale attempts to unearth some of the nuances of caste complexities that engulf Indian society, building upon the issues that Ambedkar and many other social reformers dedicated their life to. In this sense, *Hindu* is a continuum of the trajectory that questions the dominant literature which has undermined and silenced the voices of the lowest of the low people. *Hindu* underpins the upper caste Hindu's casteist psyche and its bizarre ramifications which undermine the lower caste people's identity as equal human beings. The upper caste people's caste psyche is often compared with the white people's psyche and its racist façade in American and many other western societies which see African American people as subhuman, incapable of having self-consciousness, "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world

that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois and Holloway 5). In a similar vein, the South Asian literary discourse presents Dalits with “contempt” and “pity.” The Dalits are forced to see themselves through the lens of the high caste discursive/political framework. Limbale rejects this discursive hegemony that justifies the worthlessness of Dalits and other minorities in the South Asian societies. He observes that Dalit counter discourse destabilizes the religio-political hegemony of the high caste people and dismantles the system that sustains itself on the miseries and meaninglessness of the lower caste people.

Hindu begins with a piece of a poetic-interrogation by the narrator on how an untouchable Hindu is cast as being lesser than animals by high caste Hindus who treat even insects better than a fellow human being they deem untouchable:

Hey you, listen.

You who recite the Gita to the Buffalo,

Give Ganga water to the donkey,

Scatter sugar to the ants,

Offer milk to the snake,

Worship banyan, tulsi,

Find cow piss holy,

Hey you, listen.

It's fine if dogs and cats sneak into your temple,

But it's not fine if an untouchable gets in.

It's fine if birds and beasts drink water from your well,

But it's not fine if an untouchable does so

Because he is a 'Hindu'. (*Hindu* 1)

Limbale lashes out at the upper caste Hindus' hypocrisy in their denial of the ritual right to enter the Hindu temples to low caste people at the beginning of his novel, exposing the contradiction that engulfs the upper caste Hindus' mindset. This narrative demands that the readers understand the antagonistic relationship between the upper castes and the lower caste "untouchables" within the Hindu religion. Ambedkar suggests that the lower caste people can get out of the discriminatory caste system by converting to Buddhism. His call to Buddhism as the best way out from the Hindu caste control sets the novel's mood and its direction, suggesting that the realization of the Dalit self has begun through the invocation of "Budhham Sharanam Gacchami" (I go in the name of the Buddha) and the Buddha's Dhamma Chakra mantras, through which the narrator Milind Kamble senses a symbolic way to Dalit liberation.

As an Ambedkarite, Limbale starts his novel with a reference to the Buddhist prayers and their symbolic connotations. Buddhist theology has an important influence on Ambedkar and his followers as they see that the conversion to Buddhism can achieve their dream of a casteless society. The highest point of Ambedkar and his contemporaries in challenging the mainstream religious/political sphere is Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism together with some six hundred thousand followers on October 14, 1956. V. Geetha and Nalini Rajan argue that in Buddhism Ambedkar,

found a rational, elegant, and aesthetically fulfilling world view, an ethos that was the very antithesis of the world of caste and the inequalities it mandated. This ethos was not only liberating, but also signified an ethics that would be the basis for a new politics, a new just and equal social order. (Geetha and Rajan 123–24)

While Ambedkar's attraction to Buddhism was more a political strategy than a religious one, his appropriation of Buddhism for the liberation of Dalits has an important theoretical dimension that has been absent not only in the mainstream literary discourses but also in the Ambedkarite scholarship. His exploration of Buddhism in *Buddha and his Dhamma* (1956) in relation to its equalitarian ideals attests to the fact that Ambedkar was interested to employ Buddhism for the purpose of uplifting the subalterns. In Sallie B. King's words, Ambedkar "converted from Hinduism to Buddhism expressly for social reasons: in order to repudiate the Hindu caste system with its notions of more and less spiritually and socially acceptable people, and its labels of untouchability and outcaste" (S. B. King 305). Ambedkar was highly invested in Buddhism, particularly in later days of his life and wrote vastly on Buddhism. However, there is not enough serious engagement with Ambedkar's writing on Buddhism. His *Buddha and his Dhamma* "is often dismissed as being merely a political treatise in theological garb, or a wholly unorthodox text inconsequential to quality as scholarship on 'true' Buddhism, or even worse, as hardly more than the liberation theology of a parvenu Untouchable" (Rathore and Verma ix). Ambedkar's engagement with Buddhism and his theoretical debate with Buddhist theology, stretching it for social/political gain for Dalits is contested and undermined. Furthermore, his follower, Limbale attempts to demonstrate the complexity of the Buddhist ideology and Dalits' conversion to Buddhism in a more realistic way in his work. Everyday realities in Limbale's narrative suggest that conversion to Buddhism does not guarantee a way to social/political emancipation because the Dalit youths in the Achalpur village in the 1990s have a different experience:

We have to depend on the *savarnas* for our daily bread even after conversion. Our god will change, our rituals of worship will change but the questions regarding dal roti won't change. Complete transformation is not possible until the economic slavery of the dalits is destroyed. (*Hindu* 82)

Perhaps, Limbale's characters, like Ambedkar and his followers, aspire to use Buddhist ideology as a vehicle for a social/political liberation rather than a religious/spiritual one, but everyday reality obstructs the way to liberation through Buddhist mantras. The narrator's meditative stance is suddenly disrupted when he remembers the reality of the world he lives in. His ideal world of Buddhism is disrupted by the presence and the touch of a young woman. He muses:

May my mind attain *nirvana*.

May my mind cast aside its sinful ways and
attain wisdom.

Why is this dense forest of sin thriving in my mind?

Where do these carnivorous beasts come from?

How do they roam about in this forest?

Why do these demonic strivings find my body

a safe heaven? (Limbale, *Hindu* 2)

The narrator glides away from the way to nirvana through the Buddhist practices when he encounters the physical demands of his body. Perhaps, Limbale brings the reference to Buddhism in his work in this way to warn the readers to cautiously examine the idea that Dalits' conversion to Buddhism can solve the caste question. Ambedkar understands Buddhism as a safe religion for the lower caste people. He declares, "I renounce

Hinduism which is harmful for humanity and impedes the advancement and development of humanity because it is based on inequality, and adopt Buddhism as my religion”

(Rathore and Verma xxi). He thinks it might possibly liberate Dalits. However, the living reality in Limbale’s *Hindu* demonstrates that the conversion to Buddhism does not make any remarkable difference in the lives of Dalits as Buddhism is taken as an offspring of Hinduism by the upper caste villagers and they continue to treat Dalits as untouchables. Furthermore, the question of whether Dalits should convert to Buddhism or Christianity or Islam or any other religion further complicates the Dalit liberation movement as it divides the Dalit community along religious lines and creates yet another ground for internal conflicts that manipulators such as Manikchand and Gopichand find useful for their selfish ends. These high caste goons manufacture and stage the events playing around Dalits’ weaknesses and divisions. They even turn Tatya Kamble’s murder into a lucrative business and continue staging their devious activities for their political and economic gains. Manikchand and Gopichand pawn their farm watchman, Sadananda Kamble, the brother of the murdered Tatya Kamble, and prepare him to run for the position of MLA in the reserved seat, warning him of his brother’s fate if he does not follow their instructions. Manikchand advises Sadanand Kamble:

If necessary, you will have to support the killer of Tatya Kamble. Tatya is dead now; and his bones have turned to dust. He is not going to live again. Tatya rebelled against the village and we don’t have to tell you how he ended up. You learn from his fate. The village will welcome you with open arms. (*Hindu* 106)

These hidden goons sponsor the politicians and activists aligned with them to remain at the centre of power and to continue their business of drinking, womanizing, and amassing wealth.

One of the most pertinent questions in Dalit scholarship is whether Dalits should remain within the Hindu religious domain. Most of the Dalit scholars/writers critique the Hindu religious doctrine and its acclaimed “eternal truth” based on the Vedas and the other mythological Brahminic texts and their “elaborately constructed ‘regime of truth’ through which Shudras²⁸ were violently discriminated against and excluded” (Ilaiah and Karuppusamy 2). In this light, *Hindu* unpacks one of the major debates that happened between Ambedkar and Gandhi, crystalizing the Dalit and high caste divide further. According to Mukherjee, *Hindu*, “is the continuation of this epic debate . . . where one insisted that the dalits were Hindus and the other vehemently denied it” (“Introduction” xvii). The Ambedkarite Dalit youths in *Hindu* understand that the Brahminic society will never embrace the lower caste people as social equals and therefore they must reject the Hindu cultural/religious belief system and follow a more inclusive belief system that honours their dignity. One of the major objectives of Tatya Kamble’s jalsa campaign is to appeal to the Dalits to convert to Buddhism. However, after his murder by the high caste Hindus the Dalit youths decide that the conversion to Buddhism cannot solve the caste problem as they find no difference between Hinduism and Buddhism in their everyday experiences. Buddhism is understood to be a religion similar to Hinduism by the upper caste Hindus, and the caste-based discrimination remains the same in the Buddhist

²⁸ “The catch-all Brahminical categorization for the working masses, including the erstwhile Untouchables”

(See *The Shudras: Vision for the New Path*. Penguin, 2021)

religious/cultural settings. Y. Krishan's reading of caste in Buddhism in different South Asian countries also demonstrates that the Buddhists societies do not challenge the caste system but accept it (41). When the upper caste villagers continue to uphold the power to undermine and suppress Dalits even after their conversion to Buddhism, the Dalit youths decide to convert to Christianity instead:

We wanted to convert to Buddhism. We still do. However, converting to a religion related to Indian culture brings about no change in our status in the eyes of the Hindus. It is for that reason that we are converting to a foreign origin religion. It is only then perhaps that the mentality to degrade us will change. We are Indians. We look like Indians. India is our motherland. Preventing our conversion means forcing us to continue living in the confines of the Hindu caste system. The Hindu religion that considers us untouchable is not acceptable to us. (*Hindu* 112)

Dalits' conversion to Christianity attracts more political attention than the other events because of the high caste Hindus who, by keeping Dalits within the Hindu fold, want to ensure that Dalits are never equal to the high caste Hindus. The conversion to Christianity, on the one hand, ends the affiliation of Dalits to the Hindu community, and on the other hand, converted Dalits begin to stand on equal footing with the high caste Hindus. One of the savarnas puts his discontent with Dalits' conversion to Christianity this way: "The fear is not about damaging the Hindu religion but about treating Mahars equally" ((Limbale, *Hindu* 113). Conversion does not help the Dalits to get away from the caste discriminations. As Teltumbde points out:

Caste in India is far from restricted solely to the Hindu population—it has infiltrated the country’s practice of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Sikhism as well. Contravening the egalitarian tenets of these faiths, their adherents maintain varying levels of Hindu caste discrimination against low-caste and outcaste converts; conversion did not erase caste status. (*The Persistence of Caste: The Khairlanji Murders and India’s Hidden Apartheid* 16)

However, Dalits’ conversion to Christianity seems to sting the high caste villagers’ pride as they see the “foreign” religion dismantling the old caste order and empowering the Dalits.

Limbale not only presents how caste has destroyed Indian society but also the political/legal system which is equally corrupt. Tatya Kamble’s murder plunges the village into a violent confrontation. Many high caste villagers are arrested and put into prison. The angry high caste people burn down the huts of Dalit settlement. The Dalit youth flee from their village to save their life. The court hearing for the murder case becomes weaker and weaker every day as many witnesses turn hostile, including the brother of murdered Tatya Kamble. Finally, all the murderers are acquitted. Hundreds of thousands of rupees are used to influence the court decision through the people such as Manikchand and Gopichand. The tension increases because of the failure of state mechanism to impart justice to the victimized people. Dalit youths’ growing realization that “It is very difficult to fight this social order with weapons because our enemy is hiding in the scriptures” (Limbale, *Hindu* 102) demonstrates the importance of altering the Brahminic “regime of truth” that denigrates and demolishes the Dalit identity by a counter discourse that honours the subaltern’s humanity. Reading *Hindu* makes one feel

that you are watching the events that are happening around you. This narrative portrayal of the postcolonial India is similar to journalistic reportage of what happens to Dalits that we get to read every day in the newspapers. Several actual atrocities that happened during the eighties and nineties are incorporated in *Hindu*. Going beyond what Ambedkar envisions, Limbale's text complicates the idea that perhaps conversion to Buddhism could solve the caste problem.

Limbale weaves his story in *Hindu* around the murder of Tatya Kamble, the leader of Ambedkari jalsa that threatens the upper caste hegemony and their denial of Dalits as human being equal to them. Limbale calls on the upper caste Hindus not just to listen to the contradictory reality of being a Hindu and the creation of an untouchable as the Other within the Hindu religion, but also to reflect on and unpack the crux of the divisive religio-political belief system. I call it religio-political because I consider religions, in this context Hindu religion, inherently political, that function as a manifestly political tool in various spheres of South Asian societies.

Prabhakar Kavale, Tatya Kamble's murderer, burns with rage when he sees Tatya Kamble's jalsa performances happening in the Maharwada: "seventy generations of Tatya Kamble lived off the scrapes we would discard. But Tatya Kamble did not respect our charity" (Limbale, *Hindu* 17). Because Tatya Kamble's predecessors maintained the status quo with their tamasha tradition that satisfied the upper caste desire, silently accepting the brutality they had to experience, the upper caste villagers had no issue. But the problem begins when Tatya Kamble starts to question the upper caste Hindu establishment of the village through the plays which teach the principles of equality and freedom. Dalit youths come together with a clear objective of enlightening the Dalit

community about their innate value as human beings and appealing to them to speak against the system that does not value their humanity. Jalsa becomes the best way to inject and incite the Dalit community with a revolutionary motivation that otherwise remains an impossibility. What terrifies the upper caste people most is the increasing attraction of lower caste community towards the jalsa performances and their exhortation to Dalits to stop performing their traditional duties. “Tatya Kamble’s grandfather and father were true artists, but Tatya Kamble is an Ambedkarite propagandist. In the past, Mahars used to dance in front of wedding processions, but Tatya Kamble ended this tradition” (Limbale, *Hindu* 39). Achalpur, true to its name that means an immovable object and a changeless place, is stagnant until Tatya’s jalsa begins to shake their belief and question the so-called unchangeable system that glorifies the myths based on the Sanskrit texts. Villagers begin to attend the jaslas instead of attending the bhajans at the Shiva temple. The upper caste people are happy until the tamashas provide them ‘pure entertainment’ and the Mahars accept the “bidagi” and the “bakshis” for performing the episodes from the Sanskrit texts without questioning their texts and the tradition based on these texts. Mahars’ claim for equality and their condemnation of the pernicious caste system become “too big” for the high caste people to accept.

Limbale intertextualizes the jalsa episodes, inviting the readers to experience the ways these performances contribute to dismantling the “truth” that upholds the worthlessness of Dalits. Tatya Kamble’s innovation and his leadership in jalsa compositions and performances increase uneasiness among the upper caste people. These shows openly question the Hindu scriptures, Hindu gods and their “unquestionable” authority. The whole village becomes the stage and the plot of Ambedkari jalsa structures

itself around the village system and its leaders, and their atrocities are deftly interwoven and represented to educate the villagers about their subjugation and incite their revolutionary angst against discrimination. The transformation of tamasha into jalsa and the coming together of the Dalit youths for a radical break stir the upper caste village, as the people in Maharwada get increasingly attracted to the jalsa performances instead of the bhajans in the Shiva temple. The senior Dalit people, however, are not ready yet to accept this radical approach towards the Hindu tradition. They fear that such radical approach will rupture the connection between the upper caste and lower caste people and Dalits will lose their jobs in the upper caste households and farms. Limbale highlights the anxieties of the senior Dalits that the new Dalit movement might destroy the old order and push Dalits into further difficulties by infuriating the powerful upper caste people in the village. During one of the jalsa performances, an old Dalit man accuses the Dalit youths of disrupting the social order, “What kind of show is this? We can’t understand a thing. You are wasting our time. Show us the *Raja Harishchandra Taramati* play. Shut this show down” (Limbale, *Hindu* 47). Perhaps, Limbale is pointing towards the complexity of adapting a radical social change and the challenge that the leaders face in the quest for Dalit liberation. Caste, which exhibits “timelessness, all-pervasiveness, and changelessness” (Aloysius, “Caste in and above History” 151), is believed to have existed since Vedic time as a norm, and to “counter sterilize” this one dimensional epistemological approach becomes a challenging issue in a normative South Asian Hindu society that does not accept any alternative imaginary domain that seeks to invade its enclosed space.

The Dalit liberation movement gets intensified particularly after the foundation of the Dalit Panthers and its literary/political revolution. The increasing number of Dalit literary texts persistently reject the false assumptions of the dominant discourse and produce a counter-narrative in which the Dalits are represented as the major characters having their own voice. This literary/political counter discourse has created a strong Dalit leadership which could forcefully challenge their socio-political marginalization and work for Dalit representation in various state institutions. However, *Hindu* observes that there are cracks in the Dalit leadership which are damaging to the Dalit liberation movement. Dalit liberation becomes even more complicated when the leaders themselves are divided and fall prey to the hideous manipulators. The narrator, who is an educated Dalit man, is trapped between his own selfish desire, which makes him surrender to the people such as Manickchand and Gopichand. He is caught between orthodox Hindu ideology—he secretly worships the Hindu gods and goddesses whenever he feels weak and troubled, and publicly advocates for the Dalit liberation movement. The contradiction between his private and public self indicates a sheer confusion and inability of an educated Dalit who constantly switches between two opposing ideologies as necessary for his selfishness. The narrator explains, “Whenever I feel weak and helpless, I stand before the Hindu gods and goddesses with folded hands. And when I am bloated with self-confidence and dreaming of revolution, I go and stand with a bowed head before Babasaheb Ambedkar and Gautam Buddha’s figurines” (Limbale, *Hindu* 5–6). The failure of the educated Dalits to embrace the Ambedkarian philosophy on equality, for Limbale, is one of the major setbacks that weaken the Dalit liberation movement. Even though Ambedkar’s outlook on various issues did not go unchallenged and “his opinions,

decisions, and actions kept changing, sometimes shifting to the opposite stand from one he had previously taken” (Teltumbde, *Republic of Caste: Thinking Equality in the Time of Neoliberal Hindutva* 127), Ambedkar’s ideals rooted in liberalism and his commitment to the annihilation of caste are some of the major principles that his followers could inherit. Anand Teltumbde observes that those who call themselves Ambedkarites, instead of engaging with his work meaningfully, approach Ambedkar “as pilgrims do god,” despite his warning against his deification. Teltumbde further argues, “The way Ambedkar is invoked by the political class, and even by dalit intellectuals—whether stemming from sheer ignorance or to gain traction with the ruling classes—reduces him to an inert godhead, merely to be worshipped” (*Republic of Caste: Thinking Equality in the Time of Neoliberal Hindutva* 118). Limbale exposes this bifurcation of Dalit movement from the main course of the annihilation of caste and critiques the so called Ambedkarites who misuse his name for their political gain and mislead the movement. One of the most prominent issues in *Hindu* is the question about Dalit movement and its various contradictions that weaken its traction.

It looks like the leaders in *Hindu* are engaged in their own selfish gains rather than the liberation of the Dalit people in a true sense. The people such as the former minister, Rohidas Nagdive, who represented the Dalits and aspire to represent again, continue to benefit from the movement and forget the fight against their enemy. Rohidas Nagdive’s activities can be juxtaposed with the Dalit administrators and leader in Teltumbde’s documentation of the Khairlanji massacre²⁹ in which “The entire chain of

²⁹ A Dalit family: Surekha Bhotmange (40), her three children Sudhir (21), Roshan (19) and Priyanka (17) were murdered by the high caste (OBC: Other Backward Caste) people because this family refused to

bureaucracy, staffed with dalits, failed to deliver at every possible step” (Teltumbde, *The Persistence of Caste: The Khairlanji Murders and India’s Hidden Apartheid* 183). What Limbale presents in his narrative is the replication of the everyday incidents such as Khairlanji and many others where the Dalits are victimized and even the Dalit leaders and administrators completely fail to recognize the brutality of caste and ignore the gravity of caste-based atrocities. Limbale observes that the Dalit leadership needs to reflect upon the contradictions and confusions within and find more effective ways to deal with the caste-based oppression in India. Those who claim to be the followers of Ambedkar, such as Milind Kamble and Rohidas Nagdev deliberately fail to understand Ambedkar’s sensibility and get sidetracked from the main agenda of the annihilation of caste.

Limbale’s Achalpur experiences a lot of changes after the murder of Tatya Kamble. The media, the government, and the public begin to pay attention to Dalits’ issues. The Dalit basti which is burned down by the angry mob of high caste villagers transforms into a colony of new houses, a concrete road, a school, a library, taps for drinking water etc. The Dalit youths who fled the village to save their life come back and revive the jalsa again. The Dalit neighborhood’s name is changed from “Maharwada, denoting a caste identity to Bhimnagar, denoting an Ambedkar identified, political identity” (A. P. Mukherjee, “Introduction” xxvi) . However, these things do not bring any significant changes to Dalit lives. They continue to depend upon the high caste people for their economic survival. These changes are made just for temporary political gains and not to break the economic dependency of the Dalits. The divide increases further, and the

confirm to the expectations of the caste-Hindu neighbours. (See Anand Teltumbde, *Persistence of Caste - The Khairlanji Murders and India’s Hidden Apartheid*)

two groups become confrontational. The upper caste youths form a Hindu paramilitary group called Shivashakti, named after the Hindu god Shiva, to fight the Dalits replicating the RSS (Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh), the ideological backbone of BJP, the Indian ruling party. Caste atrocities increase and clashes between the Shivashakti group and Bhimashakti, group named after the first name of Ambedkar, that Dalit youths formed to fight against the high caste militants, heighten. All the accused of Tatya Kamble's murder are acquitted. Shivashakti group, operates ruthlessly, even more powerfully under the patronage of people such as Manikchand and Gopichand who operate between the lines. Its increasingly intolerant behaviour towards Dalits and other minorities reminds us of the ongoing activities of the RSS in India today.³⁰ There is a dim hope that things will change in Achalpur. Shivashakti group operates in Limbale's narrative to "straighten" the Dalits, roaming around the village with tridents in their hands and "har har mahadeb" slogan on their lips to frighten the Dalits, while the RSS's violence towards Dalits and other minorities shakes and shatters the postcolonial India and its secularism. Neera Chandhakoe observes, "RSS and other assorted fringe outfits belonging to the larger Hindutva brigade have been granted an opportunity to carry out their a little less than a century-old project of creating and sustaining a nation exclusively of and for the Hindu community, almost by divine right" (xi). In *Hindu*, the Shivashakti group members, with tridents and saffron flags roam around the village, threatening Dalits and other minorities exactly as the RSS does in contemporary India. The Shivashakti is intolerant towards the people who oppose the Hindu belief system: "Hindu Society is awake now and therefore

³⁰ Samanth Subramanian talks elaborately on how RSS and BJP are engaged in violence in an article "How Hindu Supremacists are Tearing India Apart" published in the Guardian on 20 Feb 2020.

people must stop criticizing Hindus” (*Hindu* 96). They march around, inciting “provocative incidents such as lynchings, hate speech, threats and coercion” (Chandhoke xi), reflecting the face of the RSS. Bhimashakti activists attempt to counter the Shivashakti groups in a rather different way, by distributing pamphlets, organizing jalsas, and other public gatherings, but can that bring any meaningful change?

In the pivotal event of the novel, the inheritor of Tatya Kamble’s jalsa, Kabir Kamble kills the acquitted killer, Prabhakar Kavale as his answer to the denial of justice. The upper caste people organize the victory procession for those acquitted, ignoring the intense anxiety and anger of the victimized Dalits in Achalpur. Many Dalit youths such as Mangesh Kamble, Dhiraj Pagare and Sandip Polke leave the village in search of better life as they see no change in Achalpur. Kabir Kamble however decides to stay back and “compromise” in order to live in the village. But when he sees Prabhakar Kavale and other culprits smeared in gulal powder, garland and in new clothes, he shoots Prabhakar Kavale down in the crowd and kills him. Limbale warns that resorting to violence as a response to injustice is against Ambedkar’s philosophy and cannot be a tool to the Ambedkari jalsa. Jalsa’s objective is to educate Dalits about their condition through various performances. It is an ideological tool through which “Tatya Kamble passes on Ambedkar’s revolutionary legacy to the Dalit youth who carry on the struggle after his murder” (A. P. Mukherjee, “Introduction” xxiii). Kabir Kamble’s act undermines the spirit of jalsa and therefore the Dalit liberation movement. The ending of *Hindu* demonstrates the confusion and chaos in the Dalit liberation movement. The narrator, who is consistently on the fringes of both the high caste and the Dalit groups, the Hindu/Dalit dichotomy, from the beginning of the novel, transforms into a eunuch,

symbolizing an impotent man and thereby indicating the fallibility and fragility of not only the Dalit activists and the leaders but also the Dalit movement. Limbale invites the Dalit leadership to seriously examine the equally crucial and critical problems within the liberation movement to move forward. As Mukherjee summarizes it, Limbale claims that his goal is to:

assess the successes and failures of the dalit movement, and to do an ‘x-ray’ to ‘diagnose’ the ‘disease’ that plagues it: ‘To move forward, we need to take stock of what has gone wrong.’ Milind Kamble is a brutally frank portrait of a dalit activist who has betrayed the movement for the sake of the scraps that the savarnas throw in his way: liquor, restaurant meals, sex and free gas cylinders. ‘We cannot blame everything on outsiders. We have to look at our own faults’.

(A. P. Mukherjee, “Introduction” xxi)

Milind Kamble reflects, “I became impotent the day I separated from the movement” (Limbale, *Hindu* 155). What remains is an erosion of the Dalit movement. The questions Milind Kamble asks himself, i.e., “How do they plan to build a Hindu nation when thousands of people are declared untouchables? Will they finish off the non-Hindus? How do they plan to assimilate the non-Hindus in the Hindu rastra?” (Limbale, *Hindu* 99) are pointed not only to the dominant high caste ruling elites but also to those Dalits who aspire to bring change to the lives of millions of subaltern people. There are many factors that weaken the liberation movement and continue to erode the possibility of equality. Bhima Bhole, one of the Dalit activists in *Hindu*, points out, “A movement should address the people. What have we done except gather crowds over an issue, shout slogans, and block traffic, or create problems for the administration?” (Limbale, *Hindu*

131). *Hindu* shows that Dalits' internal conflicts and compromises have obstructed the way for liberation. According to Mukherjee, "Beginning and ending the novel with a compromised dalit's internal conflict underline Limbale's purpose of exposing the enemy within" (A. P. Mukherjee, "Introduction" xx). Limbale's narrative asks the Dalit leadership to recognize the "enemy within" in order to fight meaningfully against the "external" enemy. Without looking at the inner complexities critically, and without minutely examining all aspects of social reality circumscribed within the caste/class construction of the sophisticated, one-dimensional Hindu world, the envisioning of an egalitarian society seems to be an impossibility.

Hindu, therefore, is a representation of the kind of narrative that the postcolonial India's dominant literary establishment does not acknowledge and accept as a realistic reflection of the Indian society. It is a continuation of the counter discourse that many of the earlier thinkers/reformers such as Phule, Periyar, and Ambedkar initiated and strengthened. Limbale's visceral depiction of many of the violent events in *Hindu* asks us to reflect on what we hear and read every day in the news. Limbale shows in his novel that the high caste Hindu world is profoundly disturbed by Dalits' increasing awareness and the assertion of their identity in South Asia. Dalit activists such as Tatya Kamble are victimized daily in the postcolonial India where these Dalit leaders aspire to bring hope to the millions of Dalits, who have been subjected to mockery and meaninglessness for centuries. To interrogate the thousands of years old caste system, Dalits must produce an alternative discourse that could challenge the old belief system and create a new one humanizing the Dalits. Jalsa's popularity signals the possibility of building a fairer society in which Dalits could get their fair share. However, the high caste people seem

determined to go to any extent to annihilate the caste awareness campaigns. Tatyia Kamble's murder is one of the many sophisticated lynchings that is designed and executed by the high caste people in Achalpur, reminding us of many of such Dalit lynchings carried out in contemporary India. Jalsa becomes the site of conflict in the village as the Dalits embrace its liberating mission while the high caste people condemn it for its radical underpinnings. Not only does Limbale locate the condition of the Dalits' (mis)representation within the high caste Hindu discursive tradition but also points his finger towards the Dalit leadership for their complicity in the ongoing discursive subjugation of the Dalits. His narrative demonstrates that without seriously interrogating the Hindu epistemology and one of its main products, caste, there is no possibility of Dalit liberation. Though there could be some opportunities for Dalits' participation as secured in the Constitution drafted under the chairmanship of Ambedkar, such as the quotas or affirmative action programs, Limbale shows that these programs mostly fail to address Dalits' main objectives and do not contribute significantly towards the annihilation of caste. Therefore, Limbale's voice in *Hindu* not only represents a strong discursive interrogation of the mainstream high caste literary hegemony from the traditionally closed marginal space but also exposes the postcolonial India's hypocrisy and the failure to redeem its pledge, in the lofty words of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, "to build an India where the rights of every citizen would be secure."

CHAPTER FOUR

Adivasis at the Crossroads: The Rhetoric of “Antinationalism” and Subaltern Subjectivity in *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*

In the previous two chapters, I analyzed how two prominent Dalit writers critique the rhetoric of postcolonial India that claims to have brought “freedom” to Indians from the British rule and where the post-independence institutions of governance treat all Indians as equal. Bama and Limbale document that nothing much has changed for Dalits in postcolonial India. As their oppressors were upper caste Hindus, and not the British, their oppression, indeed has worsened now that the upper caste Hindus are ensconced in seats of power.

In this chapter, I focus on the work of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, a prominent Adivasi Santhal writer who brings to light the dispossession of his people from their ancestral lands so that the business elite, in collusion with the government can dig for minerals and build thermal power plants. The short stories in his collection *The Adivasi Will not Dance* (2015) bring to surface the devastation brought upon his people by the postcolonial nation that does not recognize their land rights and uses force to evict them from the ancestral lands that sustained them from time immemorial. Shekhar documents the violence unleashed upon the dispossessed by the upper caste elites who treat the aboriginal people of India as subhuman, reminiscent of the ways aboriginal people have been treated in countries like the U.S., Canada, and Australia.

As discussed in the previous chapters, caste is central in South Asian socio-cultural identity and its dominant literary/political imagination. Caste, however, does not posit itself explicitly in the Adivasi lifeworld but collides with it in a rather implicit way in which it becomes a major instrument of subjugation, dispossession and displacement of the Adivasi people and their identity. By focusing on Adivasis' lived reality, Shekhar brings out the glaring absences in the works of dominant South Asian and the diaspora writers and brings to light the Brahminical cultural perspective embedded in their writing. His writing thus interrogates the "postcolonial" writers who conflate the subaltern with the erstwhile "colonized" without recognizing that "the colonized" whose "resistance" against "the colonizer" they write about has become the oppressor and colonizer in postcolonial India. Shekhar lays bare the hypocrisy hidden behind the slogan "Bharat Mahaan" as his protagonist in the title story, Mangal Murmu, addresses the President of India who has come to inaugurate a thermal power plant built on the land of the Adivasi villagers, razed by bulldozers, to build the plant that will provide electricity to industry. Mangal Murmu who has been brought by the government officials to entertain the President by performing the "authentic" Adivasi dance instead tells the President that "this plant will be the end of us all, the end of the Adivasi. These men sitting beside you have told you that this power plant will change our fortunes, but these same men have forced out of our homes and villages. We have nowhere to go, nowhere to grow our crops. How can this power plant be good for us? And how can we Adivasis dance and be happy?" (187). This address of Mangal Murmu to the President of India, also the last words of the text, powerfully lay bare how the prosperity of the powerful is built upon the

robbing of the birthright of the Adivasi. To add insult to injury, the powerful also appropriate the Adivasi art and culture.

Though there is a lot of research on the “tribe” and how and why this term invokes a series of negative connotations that dehumanize the people who live under different historical, material, and cultural conditions than the colonizers in the Western colonial discourse, there is not enough work done on how and why the idea around the construction of “tribe” colludes with the South Asian Brahminic discourse that began with the “Aryan” invasion and continues to dominate the South Asian cultural/political discourse since then. The condescending attributes that the term “tribe” imports go back to the time of the early Vedas and many other Sanskrit texts inscribed during and after the advent of the “Aryan” invasion in South Asia, long before the modern European colonization began to disrupt and destroy the indigenous peoples and lands around the world. The early “Aryan” settlers confronted with many powerful indigenous groups who had been the rulers of different regions in South Asia and had distinct physical features and cultural/political worldviews. One of the first non-Brahmin to counter the “Aryan” claim to their superiority was Jotiba Phule, a Shudra, who according to Gail Omvedt, overturned,

the Aryan Race Theory to formulate a theory of contradiction and exploitation: brahmans were indeed descended from conquering Indo-Europeans but far from being superior they were cruel and violent invaders who had overturned an originally prosperous and egalitarian society, using every kind of deceit and violence to do so, forging a mythology which was worse than all other since it

was in principle based on inequality and forbade the conquered mass from even studying its texts. (Omvedt, *Understanding Caste* 25)

As per the proposition of Phule and other Dalit and Adivasi writers when the “Aryan” people invaded the territories inhabited by the indigenous peoples, they not only dispossessed these indigenous peoples from their lands but also destroyed their historical/cultural records. In order to maintain their supremacy, the “Aryans” began the stratification of the people in the name of varna system and permanently subjugated certain kinds of people who resisted the newcomers. The Brahminic discourse categorizes the indigenous peoples and cultures as antithetical to the “Aryan” belief system. Those who surrendered were kept within the varna stratification at the inferior level as the lowest castes, while those who opposed and confronted the outsiders were kept outside the varna system and are described in the Brahminic literature as “dasas,” “dasyus,” “chandalas,” “mlechhas,” “raksasas,” and “asuras”³¹ and presented as antagonists to the “divine” cause. The Brahminic literature erases their identity as equal human beings, relegating them to the sub-human category and away from “civilization.” These “tribes” who are looked down upon as an inferior race are not included within the caste, *jati* framework in the historical/political domain of the South Asian dominant discourse. Therefore, those who do not fit within the varna system and practice distinctly different religious/cultural norms than the ones dictated by the Brahminic authority have been broadly categorized as “tribe” in the official discourse. “Adivasi”, like Dalit, is a self-chosen identity, an empowering term deployed by the marginalized subaltern themselves but contested by the governing classes as they claim that all (Hindu) Indians are

³¹ See Prabhati Mukherjee’s *Beyond Four Varnas*

aboriginal. In *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, Shekhar weaves the stories of the Santhals, one of the Adivasi groups who are placed against the “developmental-material” projects and are dispossessed from their land and identity. Through his literary imagination, Shekhar humanizes the Adivasis who are nameless and voiceless in the dominant literary/political representation.

Shekhar’s work emanates from the angst of the erasure of the Adivasi historical/political movements for the assertion of their identity and their struggle against their oppressors— the upper caste/class elites and the British colonizers. The nationalist historiography built upon the glorification of the Brahminic culture denigrates the Adivasi identity, obliterating its historical/historiographical trajectory. Adivasi stands as a non-entity in the construction of the post-independence Indian nation and appears as an ominous shadow in the face of an otherwise “unified,” “homogenous” nation in the dominant discursive/political underpinnings. The active demonization of the Adivasi peoples and cultures by the Indian state based on the authority of the Hindu religious texts and the construction of knowledge based on the dehumanization of the indigenous people produce a kind of knowledge that seriously undermines the alternative discursive imagination which emanates from the Adivasi subject position and empowers the indigenous assertion of identity. Normative discourse stems from the assumption of the Adivasis as the Other of the ruling caste/class, and mirrors them as the backward human beings, unable to speak and act for themselves. Shekhar confronts the silencing of the dominant discursive framework and its refusal to understand and acknowledge the Adivasi worldview within a broader and inclusive discursive framework. Shekhar’s work transgresses the established notions of postcolonial literary theory and its

colonizer/colonized binary and the nationalist literature and its problematic lens that marginalizes and silences the Adivasi people. Shekhar demonstrates that the ruling elites, the upper caste Hindus, have invaded the Adivasi territories and dispossessed the indigenous people from their land and their identity. However, neither the postcolonial nor the nationalist literature recognizes the fact that there are “settler colonies” within India and that the Adivasis are colonized in the name of “modernization,” “industrialization,” and “development.” Transcending the dominant literary/cultural framework, Shekhar exposes the anomalies of postcolonial and nationalist literature and demonstrates that Adivasi literary/cultural world stems from a different epistemological standpoint.

Shekhar’s work ruptures the South Asian literary domain with its distinctive lens focused at the marginalized Adivasi communities, which are erased out of the dominant literary tradition. A work of fiction, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, explores Adivasi struggles for identity and survival against the backdrop of the upper caste/class cultural/political hegemony in postcolonial India, which stands in opposition to the Adivasi identity with a persistent adherence to the Hindutva doctrine founded on the basis of the Brahminic ideological worldview. One-dimensional Brahminic religio-political discourse categorically makes a clear distinction between the “friends” and the “enemies.” V.D. Savarkar’s exposition of the Hindu India explicitly denies the identity and existence of the so-called “the Mlechhas,” an umbrella term used to broadly categorize the non-Hindus who reject the hegemonic Hindutva doctrine and the upper caste supremacy, and who were “racially stigmatized as [were] the ‘barbarian’ elsewhere” (Robb 9). The contemporary political as well as literary establishment

continue the legacy of demonization of the “Mlechhas” and are deeply involved in antagonizing the voices which challenge the ways in which the dominant discourse perpetuates the upper caste/class denigration of the subaltern people. Furthermore, the Hindu nationalists call ‘indigenous people’ ‘vanvasi,’³² forest dwellers, instead of Adivasi, attributing to them “a ‘primitive’ character—the character that is being imputed to these brave (veer) but backward, ‘uncivilized’ sections of society that have still to be fully reclaimed for Hinduism” (Pandey, *Hindus and Others: The Question of Identity in India Today* 258). Shekhar’s voice challenges the hegemonic moves of the dominant which rob the Adivasis of both their land and their self-chosen identity. He challenges the upper caste/class elite writers who speak for the Adivasis and their miseries out of pity because these subjugated people “can’t speak” for themselves. Shekhar denies these propositions. Adivasi Santhal boys and girls, men and women speak in his stories. He radically departs from the imposition of the kind of knowledge in which Adivasis are represented as mere onlookers of their own diminished agency and become the passive bearers of their own subjugation. Shekhar’s is an ideological battle fought against the self-aggrandizing nationalist discourse to reclaim the existence of an alternative world which is silenced by the dominant discursive/political tradition, and which challenges the

³² The special issue of RSS Journal, *Panchajanya*, devoted to the ‘tribal’ peoples in India in 1982, entitled “Veer Vanvasi ank”, which used veer vanvasi (brave forest dweller) to designate the “tribes” rather than Adivasi, the original inhabitants. For the Hindu nationalist standpoint, the “Aryan” people represent as the original inhabitants of India. *Panchajanya* continues to translate the Adivasi people as “**vanvasi**” in its contemporary issues.

(<http://panchjanya.com>)

way through which the South Asian dominant discourse delegitimizes the Adivasi cultural/political presence.

Prabhati Mukherjee's reading of the Vedas and various other Sanskrit texts demonstrates that the Brahminic religious/mythical/discursive tradition categorizes the diverse range of indigenous peoples as the Other who resisted the alien cultural/political imposition and encountered the alien "Aryan" invaders fiercely. The people who were culturally, politically, economically, and physically different from the "Aryan" became the permanent Other in the religio-political imagination of the dominant group which consistently enjoyed the control and access to power and resources since the downfall of the indigenous control of the land and resources. Mukherjee shows that the early "Aryan" "colonizers" not only dispossessed the indigenous people from their lands but also forced an alien law of caste/varna hierarchy to bind various indigenous groups of people to permanent servitude (P. Mukherjee 83–84). The first Prime Minister of postcolonial India, Jawaharlal Nehru maintains that the main sources of the "Indian" cultures are the Vedas through which:

flow out the rivers of Indian thought and philosophy, of Indian life and culture and literature, ever widening and increasing in volume, and sometimes flooding the land with their rich deposits. During this enormous span of years they changed their course sometimes, and even speared to shriveled up, yet preserved their essential identity. (Nehru 80–81).

The self-centeredness of the Brahminic thought in Nehru's understanding as the Indian culture not only denigrates the philosophical and cultural tradition of the non-Hindus but also silences the voice of the diverse peoples and lands of South Asia. Instead of

enriching the land as Nehru claims, the Hindutva ideology “flooded” the land of the Adivasis, Dalits and other minorities by its discriminatory practices and pushed these Other of the “nation” out of its framework. Shekhar humanizes this permanent Other of the Indian dominant discourse and shows that this Other can speak and fight for themselves. His characters inhabit a world that is beyond the expectations and the cultural codes enshrined in the dominant literature and its nationalist assumptions. While Shekhar interrogates the Indian nationalist literature for silencing the Adivasis, particularly the Adivasi Santhals, he also explores their internal dilemmas and the complexities stemming from the collusion of caste/class with the Adivasi world.

The Adivasi Will Not Dance transcends the dominant literary framework where the upper caste/class characters stand in for universal humanity by bringing in the diminished human beings to the discursive centre and letting them speak as Adivasis. As Shekhar portrays the impoverished Adivasi life due to its dispossession from land rather than in the romantic colours utilized in the upper caste/class Hindutvaite imaginary that paints the Adivasi as an “innocent” “forest dweller,” he risks being tagged as an “antinational” (Chatterjee, *I Am the People* 110). His act of bringing the unheard voices of Adivasi people and their claim of Adivasi identity in India where Adivasis appear only to entertain the “tourists” and carry forward the “great Indian tradition” with their ossified tribal image brings anxieties and a sense of denial in the upper caste/class elite’s psyche. This is reflected through the voice against the writer and the book at various platforms including Jharkhand assembly in which both ruling, and the opposition parties demanded a ban on *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*. The dominant upper caste/class bourgeois discourse continues to propagate the Brahminic tradition in which, as

Golwalkar envisioned, upper caste Hindu people are the true owner of the land where other alternative ideas cannot exist. Those who challenge the Brahminic worldview are the “problem” for the Indian nation. Golwalkar argues:

The conclusion that we arrive at is that all those communities that are staying in this land yet are not true to its salt, have not imbibed its culture, do not lead the life which this land has been unfolding for so many centuries, do not believe in its philosophy, in its national heroes and in all that this land has been standing for, are, to put it briefly, foreign to our national life. And the only real, abiding and glorious national life in this holy land of Bharat has been of the Hindu People.

(162)

Golwalkar clearly sets a demarcation on who is part of the nation and who is the enemy of the nation. In order to be an Indian, one must embrace the “glorious” tradition and its philosophy enshrined in the classical Sanskrit texts. Shekhar does not choose to imbibe the culture that diminishes and denigrates him and his people. In the eyes of the nationalist, then, Shekhar falls on the Other side of the nation who is “antinational” because he is not a Hindu.

Shekhar’s work is premised upon the Other side of the nationalist domain which is silenced and excluded by the “master narratives.” Milind Wakankar argues that the post-independence nationalism in India, “had found in the idea of “one culture” a convenient bulwark both against the powerful intellectual legacy of the West introduced in India by colonial rule and against all those “fragments” of the imaginary nations (sects, castes, tribes, localities) that seemed resistant to the call to unity” (41). The idea of “one culture” that wants to steamroll the multitudes of diverse cultures is an idea propagated

by the privileged elite caste/class with an assumption to return to the world inscribed in the ancient Sanskrit scriptures. The nationalist discourse is invested in promoting the idea of the one-dimensional, unitary view of the nation that not only silences the contemporary voices emerging from the peripheries but also denies and dismisses the historical contributions of the subaltern. Even the subalternist historians, despite their claim to represent the subaltern and write history from below, reproduced the “elitist biases” in which “the subaltern is not necessarily the subject of his or her history” (Chakrabarty 233). Though Dipesh Chakrabarty seems to have identified the lapses in the Subaltern Studies, he is another upper caste theorist who has not produced any work focused on Adivasis. While trying to avoid the elitist analytical or critical distance with regard to the Adivasi history, particularly, reading Santhal rebellion³³ of 1855-1856, called *Santal Hul*, in eastern India, the leading subalternist, Ranajit Guha, reproduces yet another “‘good’, not subversive, histories, which conform to the protocols of the discipline” (Chakrabarty 236). The “analytical distance” limits the historian, Guha, from understanding the elements of subjectivities that the Santhal leader, Sido Murmu’s speech entails, and distances the writer from his subject of representation. By doing so, Guha falls into the same hegemonical elitist historiographical domain conforming to the “protocols of discipline” which the Subalternists claim to dismantle. The mainstream historiographical analyses “ignore, the meaning and relevance and resonance of the *Hul* for contemporary Adivasis including Santhals, such as the descendants of the leaders of the *Hul* and the residents of the sites affected by the insurgency itself, and the colonial

³³ Against the oppression of the upper caste zamindars, moneylenders, traders, police, and the colonial rulers. See Peter B. Andersen. *The Santal Rebellion 1855-1856: The Call of Thakur*. Routledge, 2023.

counter-insurgency” (Rycroft 49). The *hul* which not only embodies the indigenous subject-position but also continues to evoke the indigenous heritage as empowering is erased from the mainstream literary/political representation. In order to re-establish the Adivasi subject-position, the hegemony of the dominant discourse and the elitist representation must be confronted and dismantled by an alternative discourse which locates the Adivasi identity “intricately enmeshed with their right to the forest, land, water and natural resources” (Gupta 45) at the centre of its discursive imagination.

Shekhar’s entry into the literary world with a strong alternative imagination is not received well by the carefully controlled and monopolistic upper caste/class nationalist literary establishment. The Brahminical nationalists envision a nation without the presence of the subaltern voice. As Ilaiah puts it: “in this nation anything was possible, but construction of the philosophy of the Sudras, the Chandalas and the Adivasis by their own representatives would be impossible. When that impossibility is transcending into possibility, there begins a fear of philosophy itself” (*The Weapon of the Other* 176). Here, Ilaiah talks about the philosophy of liberation which might perhaps liberate even the oppressors, but they refuse to understand the magnificence of it and deny its possibility. Shekhar’s attempt to reproduce the Adivasi belief system in his work creates an anxiety in the Hindutva forces as it presents a fundamentally different look into the world than the Brahminic one in which the Adivasis speak, work, and resist the oppression and exploitation. This inherent, deep seated fear of interrogation by the alternative viewpoints led to Shekhar’s book being publicly attacked as defamatory and demands were made for banning it. Perhaps, one of the main reasons behind the ostracization of Shekhar’s text is its attempt to dismantle the “tradition” of Indian mainstream literature and its propagation

of the Hindutva ideology. *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* has received a wide a range of attention for its portrayal of the Adivasi Santhals pushed to the fringes of Indian nation-state and the nationalist literature. However, the controversy surrounding this text, particularly, one of the stories, “November is the Month of Migration” in the text deemed as “derogatory” misrepresentation of the Santhal women, led to the writer being suspended from his job as a medical officer at a government hospital in Jharkhand and the banning of the text by the Jharkhand state government.

In this short story, a twenty-year old Santhal woman, Talamai agrees to casual sex with a policeman in exchange for food and money while waiting for a train to go to work in the zamindars’ farm in another district. Shekhar’s portrayal of Talamai’s sexual behaviour was declared to be “derogatory to Santhal women” by the gatekeepers of morality. Shekhar’s text is “accused of obscenity and of portraying women of the Santhal tribe in a bad light.” As a result, the Jharkhand Chief-Minister gave order “to confiscate” the copies of *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* and “initiate legal action against him (the writer).”³⁴ What this episode demonstrates is the arrogance of the ruling upper caste/class elites against a “backward” writer for “daring” to speak against the dominant upper caste/class elite oppression and their one-dimensional knowledge production projects through various nationalist channels. While poverty driven prostitution as well as rape of Adivasi women are both, day to day realities, the elite denies them in the name of Hindu/Indian culture that “honours” its women like “goddesses.” A letter written by the Adivasi writers, academicians, and intellectuals in solidarity with Shekhar exposes the

³⁴ See “Ban on ‘The Adivasi Will Not Dance’: Support Pours in for Sowvendra Shekhar”, National Herald India, 29 August 2017.

fragility of the postcolonial India and its inability to read and hear the alternative imaginations. A part of this letter reads:

The ban on *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* is not only deplorable in itself but also adds to a series of dangerous precedents of books being banned on flimsy grounds in India. This ban mania (also targeted at films, events, statements, tweets, foods, relationships and what not) is an ominous attack on freedom, democracy and rationality. (Editor)

The ban mania that the signatories of this letter talk about has overwhelmingly impacted many writers and intellectuals in India recently who dare to go against the grain and challenge the ways in which the dominant caste/class controls and disseminates knowledge. Shekhar's voice and stance as a writer from a political/cultural (dis)location in India incites a direct engagement of the state with the writer in the act of silencing his alternative voice based on the controversy orchestrated by those "who were behaving like self-appointed guardians of Adivasi culture and morality."³⁵

The routine Talamai follows at the railway station in "November is the Month of Migration" is nothing but a condition that the dominant upper caste/class societal expectation has of a Santhal woman who possesses no dignity as an equal human being in the dominant cultural, political, and discursive domain. What she does is a routine reality that most of the Santhal women in her village have encountered on a regular basis. When the policeman approaches Talamai and asks her to do "the job" for him, she "knows what work he is talking about" (Shekhar 40). Postcolonial India has no priority to educate and empower the Adivasi people. Talamai's act of submission shows us a debilitating

³⁵ My personal correspondence with Shekhar, 12/17/2018

absence of any possible transformation and sensitivity towards the backwardized Adivasi people in India.

Talamai's is a Christian family. Christian missionaries are said to have important impact on the Adivasi people in raising their awareness about their status and the value of human rights. Kailash C. Baral points that "the missionaries have been instrumental in giving the hill tribes their script as well as educating them" (Baral 9). Joseph Bara finds a more powerful impact of Christianity on the Adivasi worldview. He argues that "The argumentative tribal mind employed the adopted Christianity not only for cultural rationalisation of the tribal rights, it also engaged it as a potent resource at a higher pedestal, i.e., to contest the imposed concept of tribe and construct a new one, towards the effort of regaining their lost status" (Bara 93–94). Of course, missionaries' effort to educate the underprivileged cannot be underestimated but what we see on the ground is a different reality that calls into question the claim that the tribals have been empowered by the benevolence of Christianity. Shekhar's story unravels the discrepancy between the professed version of missionaries and their practices among the people at the fringes of South Asian societies. Neither Talamai's parents nor their children got to see "the inside" of a school despite being Christians (Shekhar 40). This reminds us of the Dalit children in Bama's narrative who must work in the factories to support their families or look after their siblings instead of going to school. So, there is a double failure here: both the missionaries and the postcolonial Indian government have not only not educated Santhals but actively robbed them of their lands.

The caste/class structure is so normalized and so subtle in South Asia that the discrimination engendered by the upper caste/class goes unnoticed and therefore

uninterrupted by the people in general. It is understood to be the duty of the lower caste/class people to serve the upper caste/class people without any question. The subalterns are destined to follow this “normality.” What we see in Talamai’s readiness to have sex with a policeman who is much higher in class hierarchy (and perhaps caste too) is nothing more than a reconstitution of an image of the Brahminic socio-political structure that sustains itself through the relegation of the “lowest” people to the systemic routine of servitude as a normal phenomenon. At the proposal of sex by the policeman “Talamai debates if she should follow and decides to. He is offering food after all and she is hungry” (Shekhar 40). Talamai understands the nature of this proposal, but she chooses between hunger and exploitation after a “debate.” The priority for survival comes before any fight against exploitation. She has seen such things happening many times at many places with many Santhal women of her community: “She knows many girls who do that work with truck drivers and other men. And she knows that on their way to Namal, Santhal women do this work for food and money at the railway station” (Shekhar 40). What compels the Santhal women to be the victims of systemic exploitation is their poverty and the lack of employment opportunities, which contribute in denigrating Adivasi Santhal women in postcolonial India. They are forced to submit themselves to the higher authorities in the same way as they work for the *zamindars*, the landlords, because they need food to survive. They can’t fight against their exploitation with empty stomach. It is not Talamai who cannot speak. It is the system, which refuses to hear the voice of the victimized people who are subjected to inhuman conditions. The narrator describes:

Talamai takes care not to scream, or even wince. She knows the routine. She has to do nothing, only spread her legs and lie quiet. She knows: everything is done by the man. She just lies—passive, unthinking, unblinking—as cold as the paved ground she can feel through the thin fabric of the gamcha, as still as an inert earthen bowl into which a dark cloud empties itself. (Shekhar 41)

Talamai has not lost her voice. She speaks through her act of submission to a higher authority, but the postcolonial India fails to acknowledge the ways in which the upper caste/class domination resurfaces through the structural imbalance that keeps the subalterns out of the nationalist boundary. Instead of protecting and providing equal opportunities the postcolonial Indian “authority” continues to exploit the marginalized Santhal women and treat them as non-entity.

Postcolonial India has not opened schools where girls like Talamai can get education. Shekhar’s stories portray the characters who have been given few or no opportunities to move on the social ladder. Almost all of Shekhar’s stories show women as illiterate, both mothers and daughters. Adivasi women get sold into prostitution, or they find sugar daddies. Sona and many other girls in “Merely a Whore” work as prostitutes because they have no other choices for survival. Because the Adivasi land has been robbed and turned into a coal mine town, they have lost their livelihood. The question of survival becomes the priority for the Santhal women before the resistance to their exploitation. “Desire, Divination and Death” portrays a picture of a Santhal woman, Subhashini, who is illiterate, works in a factory, while her two daughters, Parul (14) and Nilmoni (11) take responsibilities of looking after their younger brother at home. She cannot even read the clock at the factory. Despite her hard work she cannot save the life

of her child who would probably have been saved if she could get him to hospital.

Though illiterate some of the women in Shekhar's stories make choices that give them a better financial stability. Sulochona and Mohini in "Eating with the Enemy" find ways to earn a living despite their exploitation and victimization by their own men. Sulochona knows that "outsiders" have robbed her community of their birthright and tell the Bihari woman who chastises her for plucking some drumsticks, "This is *our* land. Don't forget, *you* all are outsiders here. I am a daughter of this land and *all* the trees here belong to us!" (Shekhar 68). She is aware of the exploitation but as Talamai, her choice is between survival and the fight against her oppression. Sulochona chooses to survive as all the women do in Shekhar's stories.

Baso-jhi in "Baso-jhi" is kicked out of her house by her own sons "calling her a witch" because her younger son's child dies of diarrhoea. Though devastated by this she finds a way to survival working in a Santhal family and telling oral histories to the Santhal children in a newly established Copper Town, "which bore the repercussions of development, the nationalization of the mine and the factory, the opening up of two more quarries, and the confiscation of the villagers' properties so roads and living quarters could be built" (Shekhar 115). Shekhar brings one of the most important aspects of Adivasi identity that constitutes the oral tradition and its strength in continuing the literary/cultural value in Adivasi world through Baso-jhi's stories. One of the pressing questions that the print culture brings about literature undermines the oral literature that is in existence from time immemorial. When we venture to talk about Adivasi literature, the modern literary establishments do not seem to recognize the richness that the Adivasi oral

literature carries with it and therefore erases it from the annals of their literary documents. G.N. Devy argues:

I do not dispute the claim of written compositions and text to the status of literature; but surely it is time we realize that unless we modify the established notion of literature as something written, we will silently witness the decline of various Indian oral traditions. That literature is a lot more than writing is a reminder necessary for our times [sic]. (Devy, *Painted Words: An Anthology of Tribal Literature* xii)

Oral literature is integral to the indigenous Adivasi identity and without taking this into a serious consideration, we silence the voices of millions of people, who have different notions of literature. “Baso-Jhi” highlights the importance of oral tradition through which the new generation of Santhal boys and girls get informed about their history embedded in their oral narratives. The narrator describes one of Baso-jhi’s story telling episodes thus:

Seven pairs of eyes gazed intently at the woman who was taking their young minds on journey to realms of magic and fantasy. To lands that lay beyond their imagination, where the sun and the moon play happily together and stars swing from the boughs of tall, magical trees. To lands where the princesses are fairer than the fairest of them all, and heroes stronger than the strongest. To the lands of nine-headed demons, wicked chieftains, conniving stepmothers and conspiracy-concocting witches. (Shekhar 114)

These kinds of oral narratives keep the Adivasi cultural identity alive and underscore the importance of storytelling as inherently integral to the Adivasi life. Baso-jhi brings light

to the Santhal children with the colourful stories of the Adivasi world until she is alleged to be a witch responsible for the death of people in the community, including a little daughter of the couple she works for. Baso-jhi once again is victimized and disowned by her own Adivasi community in which she was a bridge between the old and the new generation. When she overhears the conversation of her landlord, Soren babu and his wife, she decides to leave yet one more time to search for a way to her survival. Adivasi men are also cruel to them as we see in almost all the stories. As in the Dalit narratives, Shekhar's women characters are doubly oppressed, for being Adivasi and for being women.

The lower castes, minorities and the Adivasis appear merely to represent the ominous shadow of India in which they are mute onlookers of their own dehumanization. However, Shekhar's characters in *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* represent the opposite of what we are used to reading in the mainstream literary works. When we see Arundhati Roy, Mulk Raj Anand and many other writers' work, we encounter their portrayal of Dalit as lesser human beings, ripping off their agency. These writers create the "discourse of pity" (A. P. Mukherjee, *Postcolonialism: My Living* 52) so that the upper caste/class readers understand the plight of the people at the bottom, develop enough sensibility for their sufferings, and come to "rescue" them. While we see some kind of Dalit presence and (mis)representation in the dominant literary works, the Adivasis are completely absent in them. Kancha Ilaiah criticizes how even the Marxists overlook the existence of the "Dalitbahujan" subalterns in their literary works:

No poet thought that what people talk about, discuss and communicate with each other every day makes poetry. Even poets and writers who were born in these

Hindu families and later turned Communists, atheist or nationalist, they too never picked up the contents of our daily lives as their subjects. Ironically even the names of those revolutionary leaders sounded alien to us. For them, Yellaiah, Pullaiah, Buchaiah, Buchamma, Lachamma were names of the Other. And the Other need never become the subject of their writings or the centre of their narratives. (Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu* 13)

Shekhar, an Adivasi himself attempts to represent Adivasi characters such as, Biram Soren, Talamai Kisku, and Malgal Murmu, and their cultural/political/geographical locations as the central elements in his literary work. He contests the dominant discourse's image of the happy, dancing Adivasi who is called to participate in the celebration of the dominant's act of dispossessing him/her. Postcolonial India, while being silent about the Adivasi dispossession and hunger, loves to represent Adivasi dances in the floats in the Republic Day parade and many other "cultural" representations of India. What we see in these spectacles is an exhibition of the Adivasi culture as the exotic showpiece that highlights India's insensibility towards minority cultures and people rather than a fair representation of diversity with respect and dignity for the Adivasis. Adivasis become the subjects of their own diminished selves in various parades designed and dictated by the upper caste/class ruling elites in which the "representation" of the diverse cultures is deemed mandatory. Shekhar's work shows the bitter truth of Adivasi life: denial of education, healthcare, and compensation. As Mahasweta Devi observes, "The tribals of India are denied everything" (Devi and Spivak iii).

Caste continues to collude with the Adivasi identity. The narrator in "They Eat Meat" introduces Biram Soren, an Adivasi Santhal man who worked as a director, now

transferred to Vadodara, Gujrat a more conservative province than Jharkhand. Biram Soren's place of origin and his last name immediately raise eyebrows of the landlord in Vadodara, and place Biram to a lower status in India. Though he is an officer and educated person, his "tribal" identity cancels his rights to claim ownership of "his" country. Biram's first meeting with Mr. Rao brings out similar kinds of Brahminic undertones that the Dalit writers interrogate. Mr. Rao does not hesitate to ask Biram:

‘Er... Isn't Soren a tribal surname? Please, I just want to know for information's sake’.

Biram-kumang was shocked at being asked this so directly, especially by the gentle-seeming Mr. Rao, but he kept his composure.

‘Yes, sir,’ Biram-kumang answered. ‘We are tribals. Santhal.’

‘Please, I hope you don't mind, Mr. Soren, I have nothing against tribals. I have worked with tribals in my various postings all over the country. I have even lived in Ranchi. I respect all communities. And in this city, you see, *even we* are outsiders.’ (Shekhar 5–6, emphasis is mine)

What we see here is nothing more than a regurgitation of upper caste/class arrogance of supremacy that results in the Othering of the lower caste/class people and continues to propagate the idea of exclusion. While trying to be nice to Biram, Mr. Rao establishes a clear distinction between the upper caste/class people and the "tribal" Adivasis who have to be aware of the "pollution" they might bring to the upper caste community. He reminds Biram to understand his "inferior" position and act accordingly in order to survive in a casteist society. Mr. Rao continues, "You see Mr. Soren... people may want to know about you. They are always curious. If they ask you where you're from, please,

will you just tell them that you're from Jharkhand? Just that much, nothing more"

(Shekhar 7). Mr. Rao further explains, "People here believe in purity," and "Tribals, even the lower-caste Hindus, they are seen as impure" (Shekhar 7). Biram has to negotiate with the purity-pollution dichotomy. This idea of purity and pollution is based on the Brahminic worldview which constitutes upper caste people as pure and the low caste, Adivasis and non-Hindus as impure. Or in other words, the "Mlechhas" contribute to the pollution of upper caste Hindus, and by extension, the nation. Hindu nation dictates not only what people should read and write but also what they should and should not eat. Eating meat is the tradition of Biram's family, but they cannot eat meat at this location because neither the people in Vadodara eat non-veg nor do they approve of people eating non-veg food. People are forced to follow what the upper caste/class approves of because they are the "nation" and they set the rules. Adivasis are not allowed to choose even the food they eat traditionally in secular democratic postcolonial India. What Shekhar unravels in this story is the continued inscription of the upper caste nation and its inferiorization of the subaltern identities.

Shekhar refuses to legitimize the subjugation and the stigmatization of the Adivasis by the dominant literary domain. His work engages in constant dialogue with the idea of Indian modernity which not only constitutes lower castes, Adivasis and minorities as its Other, "but also inscribes itself silently as upper caste" (Pandian, "One Step Outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere" 1738). As Mr. Rao reminds Biram Soren that the tribals, who are outside the caste framework, occupy the peripheral space and are "impure", he implores the idea of the same Indian modernity which excludes the "backwardized" Adivasis. When Adivasis begin to speak and assert

their identities, it invokes an antagonistic position in the upper caste/class realm. The representation of Biram, as a government officer and his sons studying in the reputed colleges in town portray something unexpected in the conventional knowledge produced by the upper caste/class cultural/political hegemony. Tribals occupying the social/political spaces is an unconventional sight in the privileged upper caste/class knowledge construction. Shekhar subverts the hegemonic discursive imaginary and its one-dimensional approach by humanizing the Adivasis and empowering them with education, success and accessibility which are not available in the upper caste/class textual representations. Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd outline that “One aspect of the struggle between hegemonic culture and minorities is the recovery and mediation of cultural practices which have been and continue to be subjected to institutional forgetting” (JanMohamed and Lloyd 8). The postcolonial literary theory fails to understand and address the complexities produced by the “institutional forgetting” of the lower castes and Adivasis. Unfortunately, it continues to propagate the “the Manichean allegory—a field of diverse yet interchangeable oppositions between white and black, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, civilization and savagery, intelligence and emotion, rationality and sensuality, self and Other, subject and object” (JanMohamed 63) to read and understand the diverse postcolonial cultural/political conditions. The subalterns are outside the framework of this dialectic of opposition. To read Adivasi cultural/political nuances we need an alternative approach which refutes the narrow lens of the postcolonial and the condescending approach of the upper caste/class discursive framework.

Shekhar explores the stories of the forgotten Adivasis, who are neither recognized by the postcolonial literary nor by the upper caste nationalist works. As we see Mr. Rao's "warning" to Biram represents a call for his silence in a Hindu society, for Biram's presence brings "pollution" to the upper caste community and possibly incites conflicts for not remaining within the "norm." Biram refuses to stay in subjugation, working for the upper caste/class landlords and factory owners. He interrogates the conventional representation of the Adivasis as backward, exotic people who are expected to entertain the "tourists" as the museum objects, and reconstructs the Adivasi image with his unconventional job, status, and accessibility. Biram's identity subverts the way we see the Adivasis' representation in the dominant literature in South Asia. The dominant Hindu culture is largely guided by the classical Sanskrit texts which portray the "tribes" as subhuman who lack agency and represent them as antithetical to the upper caste/class culture. Not all the dominant writers are considered to be Hindutva, but they are complicit in marginalizing and stereotyping the Adivasis. For example, Satyajit Ray's stereotypical portrayal of Santhals in his Bengali films, *Aranyer Din Ratri* (1970), and *Aagantuk* (1991) demonstrates the insensibility towards the Adivasis representation. In his portrayal of the Adivasi Santhals in these films, Ray constructs a civilized/savage binary with an upper caste urban elite *bhadralok's* gaze and produces a problematized depiction of the Adivasi world which is completely undermined and objectified. Both films depict the dark skinned³⁶ Santhals merely as exotic "things" to entertain the upper caste urban elites who visit the Adivasi lands to "experience" the tribal culture.

³⁶Depiction of an urban upper caste English educated girl, Simi Garewal as a Santhal woman, Duli's in *Aranyer Din Ratri* further reduces the agency of the Santhal woman.

Mahasweta Devi argues that “The *Ramayana*, one of India’s two ancient epics, seems to contain evidence of how they were oppressed, evicted from their homeland, and then forced to occupy the lower reaches of the mainstream culture. Bits of their old culture can still be glimpsed” (Devi and Spivak i). Adivasi literature intervenes in the false assumption of the dominant that the “Indian civilization found its expression through the Aryan speech” (Chatterji 5). It is the consistent denial of the Adivasi presence in the mainstream representation that Adivasi writers claim to fight against. In a response to what prompted him to write his novel *Kocharethi*, the Adivasi writer, Narayan explains:

One reason was the growing realization that creative writing was in the hands of the elite upper classes; the communities portrayed in those writings belonged to these classes. The Adivasi when represented, appeared as a monochromatic figure, like the *rakhasan* or *nishacharan* of mythological stories. It was always a negative picture; he was depicted as apathetic, unable to react to injustice or worse, inhuman or sub-human, vicious. He existed for the sole purpose of being defeated and/or killed by the forces of virtue and goodness, represented by the upper castes. The tribal was the *asuran*/the *kaattaalan* (demon). In Hindu mythology the demons are variously called *rakshasan*, *nishacharan*, *asuran*, and *kaataalan*. The last, literally means a forest dweller but also carries the connotative significance of being uncultured who had to be killed by a deity wielding a *shoolam* (trident) or a *savarna* (upper caste) of divine parentage. There were a few of us who wanted to resist such as biased representation. We wanted to tell the world that we have our own distinctive way of life, our own value

system. We are not demons lacking in humanity but a strong, hardworking and self reliant community. (Narayan 208–09)

Shekhar subverts the “biased representation” of the Adivasis and shows their alternative world where Adivasi characters have agency, unlike in the Hindu mythologies. His representation of Biram is an attempt to right the wrongs of the dominant discourse that has denigrated the Adivasis for centuries.

While Biram’s interrogation of the mainstream bourgeois cultural/political assumption is implicitly reflected through the reconstruction of his identity as a government officer, his reluctance to avoid a direct confrontation with the condescending attitude towards his identity indicates how the dominant idea of a nation fails the subaltern. Biram perhaps foresees the consequences of being vocal in claiming an Adivasi identity in a casteist community. He understands his upward mobility is tied to the dominant cultural expectations and therefore confrontation with it might be to lose his current job and status. Biram seems to silently agree on not disclosing his “tribal” identity in public and not eat meat as Mr. Rao suggests, “because this place is so neat and tidy” (Shekhar 7). Mr. Rao reinforces the notion of ceremonial purity and impurity the Brahminic culture subscribes and values, as one of the major components of the Hindutva doctrine that must be respected in order to survive in a Hindu nation. The “norm,” which is upper caste Hindu norm, in India is so dangerous that anyone caught breaking it might even be killed. Those who do not adhere to the “norm” will be exterminated. In a recent event, an Indian farmer, Mohammad Akhlaq, was killed by the mob over rumors that his family had been storing and consuming beef at home.³⁷ A report says that “The mob had

³⁷ [Indian man lynched over beef rumours - BBC News](#), 30 September 2015

been instigated by a priest who declared from a temple that the man, 50-year-old Akhlaq, had eaten beef and thereby hurt Hindu sentiments” (Krishnan). Hindu nationalist forces are indoctrinated with the rhetoric that “the Muslims are a source of grave danger to society, ‘modernity,’ ‘civilization’” (Pandey, “The Civilized and the Barbarian: The ‘New’ Politics of Late Twentieth Century India and the World” 2), and therefore have no right to live in India. Shekhar’s story represents one of such everyday mob violence that has been a part of the postcolonial India. Biram is aware of the Hindutva forces and their atrocities rampant in India, and therefore he is reluctant to assert his identity as an Adivasi in public places. It is not just in public places but also in the sanctity of his home as the “smell” of meat will betray him. Biram is strictly instructed by Mr. Rao not to cook any non-veg food in the kitchen (Shekhar 8), restricting them to eat their traditional food. Hindu India has no space for the non-Hindu identity.

In an episode describing an attack against a Muslim family in Biram’s neighborhood, Shekhar’s story demonstrates how the Hindutva forces antagonize and terrorize the non-Hindus in India. Biram witnesses a Muslim family attacked by the RSS mob in his community, and the atrocities the RSS mob commit around the city. The narrator reports, “The Sorens—and the entire neighbourhood—watched through their darkened windows as two trucks approached, nearly twenty men in each, armed with swords and sticks and burning touches, shouting ‘Jai Shri Ram!’ and ‘Mussalmano, Bharat chhodo!’” (Shekhar 22). Violently terrorizing the non-Hindu communities with the slogan “Jai Shri Ram” depicts not only the way RSS, the Hindu fundamentalist group carries out its activities for its mission of constructing a Hindu nation but also echoes Gandhi’s invocation of “Ram Rajya” as an ideal form of government. This episode in

Shekhar's story reminds us of the Gujarat pogrom enacted against the Muslims in 2002 and continued for a long time in which, "Muslim homes and religious structures were desecrated and destroyed; Muslim commercial establishments were boycotted. Countless flyers circulated, appealing to Hindus to awake to the essence of who they were—and many did" (Ghassem-Fachandi 1). There are recurring instances of violence against the non-Hindus in India, and the silence of the dominant discourse about the complicity of the state and the upper caste/class ruling elites in the annihilation of the Other tells us that the master narratives legitimize the injustice millions of people face in South Asia.

Though Muslims are victimized in the name of religion and nationalism,³⁸ Adivasis are victimized in the name of "progress" and "development." In an instance of describing the Adivasi town of Sarjomdih, the narrator in "Baso-jhi" brings a grim picture of how the "modernization" is destroying the agrarian Adivasi societies. The mineral-rich lands of the Adivasis are confiscated to build the factories and mines, in which "men were given jobs as unskilled labourers . . . in return for their fecund land" (Shekhar 115). The narrator laments the destruction of the Adivasi culture in the name of "progress": "Sarjomdih, which is standing testimony to the collapse of an agrarian Adivasi society and the dilution of Adivasi culture, the twin gifts of industrialization and progress" (Shekhar 115). The upper caste/class elite bourgeoisie is not concerned with

³⁸Shekhar relates to the Burning of Sabarmati Express in which the Hindu pilgrims were burned to death inside the train compartment. This event and the ongoing violence are believed to have roots in the Babri Masjid incident in which a Hindu temple was constructed at the site of a sixteenth-century Muslim mosque, that had been destroyed by a violent crowd in 1992. Ayodhya since has become a centre of political/religious turmoil in post-independence India. (see Ghassem-Fachandi 31-32)

the injustice of the Adivasis' dispossession from their land and culture but concerned only about the profit they can accumulate from the exploitation of the Adivasi people and their lands. The erasure of the Adivasi culture seems to be at the centre of the "developmental" project in order to further eliminate the alternative voices and legitimize the "glory" of the Brahminic tradition and establish a Hindu nation, which the dominant literary works fail to acknowledge.

Shekhar is also in conversation with Dalit writer, Sharan Kumar Limbale's text *Hindu* in which Limbale portrays how the Hindu fundamentalist group terrorizes the Muslims with their slogan "Har Har Mahadev" and forces them to chant "Vande Mataram."³⁹ Tanika Sarkar argues that the ideal embodiment of the Hindu nation reflected through the hymn "Vande Mataram" in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel, *Anandmath* and embraced by the Hindutva ideologues such as V.D. Savarkar and M.S. Golwalkar, personifies the nation as the goddess and is therefore out of the reach of the non-Hindus whose faith cannot "acknowledge a personified divinity, embodied in a specifically Hindu form" (T. Sarkar 3963). Those who do not believe in this belief system are branded as the enemies of the nation and are terrorized into chanting the slogan by the Hindutva forces. The daily newspapers are full of reports of such crimes against Muslims and other minoritized people. In "They Eat Meat" Mr. Rao's observation about different communities of Gujarat, in which Biram found his rental place, is a depiction of the segregated minority non-Hindus not just as the outsiders but also as the elements that disrupt the "peace" and "purity" of the city: "Muslims and Christians, they don't stand a chance here. They have separate areas where they live. Cities within a city. Separate

³⁹ Limbale, Sharan Kumar. *Hindu*. 96-97

bastis for Muslims, for Christians” (Shekhar 6). This not only creates an unspeakable terror and deep psychological trauma but also silences the alternative voices and opinions. The state, run under the Hindu fundamentalist government, is complicit in silencing the minorities, Dalits and Adivasis, and to speak against this is to invite confrontation with the violent mob. Perhaps, the fear Biram feels forces him to forego his fundamental rights and freedom to choose what to eat and what to say in a so-called secular and democratic nation.

On the other hand, Mangal Murmu, in Shekhar’s title story, “The Adivasi Will Not Dance,” is radical and explicit in denouncing the upper caste/class bourgeois cultural/political imposition and the dispossession of the Adivasi land and identity. The story is set around an inaugural event of a thermal power plant being constructed in Santhal Pargana by destroying the Santhal homes and displacing them from their ancestral territory, is based on an actual event that happened on April 30, 2013, in Jharkhand. Shekhar’s story presents the other side of the event which the mainstream media highlighted as a “grand project” that would supply uninterrupted electricity to help the “housewives” to watch their “favourite television serials.”⁴⁰ For these media, providing electricity to the city “housewives” seems to be much more important than recognizing the Santhals’ rights to their land and cultural identity. The media completely hides the violence enacted by the state in the Adivasi lands and dismisses the implications of the upper caste/class bourgeois alliance for the Adivasi struggle for survival as identity. It is because the “developmental-material” projects have robbed the Adivasis of their means of survival, sacrificing the rural, both the Adivasis and the so-called

⁴⁰ Plant lights up power hope in Santhal Pargana | Ranchi News - Times of India (indiatimes.com), May 1. 2013

backwards for the sake of the prosperity of the city. Instead, they chose to highlight the supply of electricity to the “housewives” who can afford the luxury of TV as a boon, completely erasing the pain that these projects bring to the Adivasi people. The Indian mainstream media does not seem to be interested in addressing the real condition of the Adivasi housewives, who can’t even afford their daily meal let alone the access to “modernity” through TV as we see in Shekhar’s work. The destruction of the Indian rural in the name of development reminds of the Canadian government forcing pipelines across the Native lands.

In the disguise of “development and progress” slogan the government agencies’ ongoing collusion with the private companies to serve their avaricious pursuits of profit and power in the Adivasi lands demonstrates how insensitive the ruling elites are towards the Adivasi people. In order to establish these projects, people’s resistance is violently crushed and thousands and thousands of Adivasis are brutally uprooted from their lands. However, the mainstream media and literature do not seem to see the ongoing brutality and cultural genocide ruthlessly targeted against the Adivasis. Mangal Murmu, the senior leader of the Santhals who was asked to lead the Adivasi Santhal band to “entertain” and “please” the Indian President and other elites present at the inaugural function has witnessed the ongoing destruction of his people and their culture. With the trauma of dispossession and displacement in his mind, Mangal Murmu can no longer follow the “tradition” of entertaining elite upper caste “dikus.” Instead of dancing to entertain the President, Murmu addresses him directly, to tell him why the “Adivasi will not dance.” As Murmu’s words are placed at the end of the story, and at the end of the book, they serve as a manifesto, breaking the silence about the dispossession of Adivasi

communities. Mangal Murmu, in his powerful interrogation of the objectification and commodification of his people and land, draws his attention towards the plight of the Adivasis with a hope that the President of the nation perhaps listens to their stories and acts to address the injustice inflicted upon them. Disillusioned Mangal Murmu, reflects:

Why would the Hindus help us? The rich Hindus living in Pakur town are only interested in our land. They are only interested in making us sing and dance at their weddings. If they come to help us, they will say that we Santhals need to stop drinking haandi. They, too, want to make us forget our Sarna religion, convert us into Safa-Hor, and swell their numbers to become more valuable votebanks. Safa-Hor, the pure people, the clean people, but certainly not as clean and pure as themselves, that's for sure. Always a little lesser than they are.

(Shekhar 173)

The Indian nation-state perpetrates a discriminatory practice and attempts to bring the Adivasis into the “Hindu fold” to perpetuate the caste/varna hierarchy and relegate them permanently at the margin, never accepting the Adivasis on equal footing. By strategically confining the Adivasis to the Hindu domain, Indian nation state undermines the Adivasis’ right to follow their own “Adi-dharam,”⁴¹ the original belief system, “a spirit-centric world as opposed to anthropocentrism of the normative religions” (Munda x). In other words, various forms of state interference in the Adivasi culture not only

⁴¹ Munda, “By Adi-dharam we mean the basis, the roots, the beginnings (adi) of the religious beliefs of the Adivasi, the first settlers of India ... also variously known as animism, animistic religion, primitivism, primitive religion, aboriginal religion, nature religion, adaivasi or janajati dharam, sarna dharam, sari dharam, sansari dharam, hahera dharam, bongaism etc.” xiii

challenge the tribal people's belief system but also disintegrate their identity. Mangal Murmu muses, "we are losing our Sarna faith, our identities, and our roots. We are becoming people from nowhere" (Shekhar 173). Shekhar lays bare the Indian nationalist self-centeredness and its oppositional stance against the Adivasis in the making of postcolonial Indian discourse which celebrates the privileging of the upper caste/class as instrumental in manufacturing a "clean" image, unblemished by the "polluting" Other. M.S. Pandian highlights how the dominant nationalism manufactures the exclusion and domination of the subaltern groups in the making of hegemonic national community. Pandian argues:

If we foreground dominant nationalism in an oppositional dialogue with the subaltern social groups within the nation—instead of colonialism—the divide between the spiritual and material, inner and outer, would tell us other stories—stories of domination and exclusion under the sign of culture and spirituality within the so-called national community itself. (Pandian, "One Step Outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere" 1736)

Mangal Murmu knows that the Adivasis will never be accepted in the Hindu framework, never deemed as pure as the upper caste people, and will be forced to exist with inferiorized identities. Murmu is against the conversion to Hindu religion because he knows that Adivasis' conversion to Hindu religion will not bring them equality or justice.

Land is central in Adivasi imagination and their cultural representation. Shekhar responds to the state atrocities and its expropriation of Adivasi land with a powerful intervention. He challenges the way the state appropriates the Adivasi land on the one hand and, on the other, represents the Adivasi culture as "a way of life based on the

egalitarian principles, a continuum of nature, ancestor and human, and symbiosis between human and animal kingdom” (Mullick x). The state under disguises of modernization, urbanization, and civilization interferes with the Adivasi cultures. Mining companies, which work hand in hand with the political, financial, and legal entities of the state, “use complex strategies of promises, threats and rewards, working together as a team ...

[Adivasis’] natural and cultural wealth is being sold off to companies and banks pursuing the sole aim of maximising profit, institutionally blind and heedless of destruction to nature as well as human beings” (Padel and Das xxi). Shekhar’s stories emerge out of these historical and material factors. His work challenges the Government’s policy of economic liberalization, translated into “wanton loot of water, forests and land – the prime resources of the tribes – even to the point of putting their lives at risk” (Meena). Magal Murmu narrates the agony of the Adivasis whose ancestral homes are being destroyed every day in the name of “progress” and “modernity” by the state and state-sponsored companies. Mangal Murmu’s shocking refusal to “please” the President and other upper caste/class elites in the grand ceremony at Santhal Pargana is the harbinger of a new beginning that shakes the dominant upper caste/class elite world with its counter narrative of the Adivasi assertion of identity. His act of resistance against the subordination and degradation under the auspices of “modernization” is not the postcolonial “resistance” against “the colonizer,” but against “the colonizer” that is now the ruler of postcolonial Indian state.

The erstwhile colonized becomes the new colonizer and assumes the control of the land and people who have a different cultural/political worldview. Mangal Murmu challenges the ideology that the Adivasis are “lesser humans.” Vahru Sonawane

underlines the new militancy of the marginalized in Postcolonial India beautifully in his poem “Stage”:

We did not go up to the stage
 That was made in our name
 Nor were we invited on to it
 We were shown
 Our place
 With pointed finger
 And we sat there (obediently)
 We were highly appreciated
 And ‘they,’ standing on the stage
 Kept telling us of our own misery
 “But our misery remained ours alone
 It was never theirs”
 We mumbled–uttered our doubts

 “They” listened intently
 And roared . . .
 Pulling us by the ear admonished us
 “Say sorry . . . otherwise . . .” (Gupta 20–21)

This piece not only recognizes the dehumanization and subjugation but also implicitly refuses to accept the objectification and silencing of the Adivasis. Shekhar’s narrative breaks the silence imposed on the Adivasi cultural/political domain and asks us to

navigate towards a different discursive framework which does not reproduce the hegemonic colonial legacy but assumes a possibility of equality and freedom, transcending the narrow nationalist and postcolonial imaginaries.

Shekhar unpacks some of the contradictions of the nationalist upper caste Brahminic ideology that claims to represent India, largely the Hindutva ideology which subsumes all the Indians, regardless of their differing religious, cultural, and racial identities, under its vague notion of India as a nation, shrouded in Hindutva myth⁴² as envisioned and propagated by V.D. Savarkar, M.S. Golwalkar, and many others in which the Adivasis appear as the antithetical “Mlechha” who pose a threat to the “glorious” past and the continuation of the Brahminic world order. Though Savarkar claims that “Hindutva embraces all the departments of thought and activity of the whole Being” (Savarkar 4), it deliberately fails to go beyond the rigid walls of caste and fails to recognize the limitations caste system creates for the development of that “whole Being.” As Aloysius asserts, the dominance of the upper caste/class people, their articulation of the nationalist ideology, and their assumption of power to the exclusion of the lower castes, Adivasis and other minorities in India, “have helped in the historiographical construction, sociological elaboration and political maintenance of a complex nationalist mythical lore, as a master-narrative, of the nation’s becoming” (Aloysius, *Nationalism without a Nation in India* 125). The construction of the nationalist mythical lore, Aloysius reminds us, is built upon the deliberate exclusion and marginalization of the non-Hindus, appropriated, and legitimized by the “master narratives.”

⁴² Savarkar, Golwalkar, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (*Anandmath*), RSS, Mother India etc, Varna system, Gandhi

Going beyond the mainstream historiographical and discursive limitations, Shekhar's story, "Adivasi Will Not Dance" represents the Adivasi voice that subverts the dominant narrative and reminds the hegemonic state and the elite bourgeoisie to understand and respect the Adivasi cultural heritage that is centered around the ownership of land and the natural resources in their natural forms. By invoking the names of Sido and Kanhu Murmu (Shekhar 174), the leaders of the *Santhal hul* through his protagonist, Shekhar, on the one hand recalls a historical rupture that the Santhal rebellion brought to the dominant historiographical discourse, on the other hand, perhaps implies that Santhals, "the descendants of the great leaders" are capable of rebelling against the dominant upper caste/class elites' invasion of the Adivasi land and identity and the complicity of the state apparatuses in the dispossession and displacement of the Santhals in the name of "modernity" and "progress." Mangal Murmu is disillusioned by the lack of Santhal unity and inability of their leaders to fight for their cause. He is furious: "Our men are beaten up, thrown into police lock-ups, into jails, for flimsy reasons, on false charges. Our women are raped, some sell their bodies on Koyla Road. Most of us are fleeing our places of birth. How united are we? Where are *our* Santhal leaders? Those chor-chuhad leaders, where are they" (Shekhar 176)? Shekhar's critique of his own community's internal division, their lack of understanding of perpetual injustice and the way Santhal leaders forsake their own people remind us of the Dalit writer Limbale's critique of the Dalit community and its leaders' insensitivity towards the annihilation of caste and the Dalit liberation movement. Mangal Murmu is frustrated:

I am sixty years old and, sitting in this lock-up after being beaten black and blue, I have no patience anymore. Only anger . . . there are no shouters, no powerful

voice among us Santhals. And we Santhals have no money—though we are born on lands under which are buried riches. We Santhals do not know how to protect our riches. We only know how to escape. (Shekhar 176)

Shekhar is critical about the Santhals' inability to protect their land and identity reminding them not to forget that they are the descendants of the great leaders like Sido and Kanhu who led the Santhal Rebellion that "has become a mobile signifier in discourses of indigenous/tribal self-determination" (Rycroft 50) in South Asia.

Mangal Murmu understands that the Santhals are alienated and are left to disintegration as their dispossession is neither recognized by the state authorities nor by any media. He painfully recalls that the TV channels swarmed around the inaugural program at Santhal Pargana seemed to be not aware of the Adivasi villagers being detained by the police for resisting against the forceful acquisition of their land (Shekhar 186). Santhals' self-assertion seems to be a distant dream for them in such external and internal complexities. The "Brahmin-Baniya" alliance as Kancha Ilaiah points out has been central in carrying out the sophisticated domination of the mineral-rich Adivasi lands and has constructed a slogan of "modernity and progress" based on the narrow, one-dimensional Hindutva ideology which rigidly controls its caste border and permanently deprives the subalterns from their access to "modernity." Aloysius argues that the caste system:

pervaded the entire region to a greater or lesser degree through reli-gio-cultural symbolism in the form of mythologies, ubiquitous temples as social institutions, Sanskrit as the sacred language, codification of laws and customs, and most of all through the actual socio-economic dominance of Brahminic and other

collaborating upper castes, and imbued with a sense of cultural unity. (Aloysius, *Nationalism without a Nation in India* 26)

As Aloysius highlights, the state seems to be completely indifferent to the ongoing destruction of the Adivasi world and continues to propagate the Brahmin-Baniya alliance to suppress the disenfranchised people. Mangal Murmu understands the motive behind the Adivasi cultural extermination and interrogates the way through which the dominant groups manipulate and oppress the Adivasis. Perhaps, he still has hopes that the President, who is also from the Birbhum, a district next door, will listen to his voice and understand the Adivasi sufferings and frustrations. This is perhaps the last attempt to bring attention of the state to the injustices against the Adivasis: “He should have heard me speak, no? But he didn’t” (Shekhar 170). Can the subaltern speak? Yes, they do. Mangal Murmu reflects upon the condition of the dispossessed Adivasis in the evacuated eleven villages of the Santhal Pargana and upon the motives of the powerful businessmen who collaborate with the state in order to expose the contemporary Indian state’s act of Adivasi cultural genocide. But his voice is silenced. He remembers the “Ministers from Dilli, Ranchi, all dressed in their best neta clothes, laughing and chatting among themselves. All are happy with the progress, the development. The Santhal Pargana would now fly to the moon. The Santhal Pargana would not turn into Dilli and Bombay” (Shekhar 185). Shekhar juxtaposes two opposite Indias here— one that is oblivious to the existence of the Adivasis, Dalits and minorities who it has deemed the Other of the nation, and the Other that is constantly in battle with the state to prove their meaning and existence as human beings. The “netas,” leaders and the businessman don’t listen to the voices of the subaltern. The President’s unwillingness to listen to Mangal Murmu’s voice

reflects the desire of the dominant caste/class to silence the subaltern voice and continue to propagate the one-dimensional cultural/political domination.

Aloysius argues that the process of backwardization of the large masses of people began with the “collusive colonialism” and continued with the nationalist movement based on the Brahminical tradition. The emergence of the Brahminic nationalism, Aloysius points out, completely did away with the “emancipatory and empowering” expressions and aspirations of the backwardized people, and “the multiple searches for casteless visions and identifications” were “reduced to the minimum and brought within the ambit of the colonially retrieved and valorized Brahminical casteism” (Aloysius, “Contextualising Backward Classes Discourse” 411). The Adivasi critical engagement with the Brahminical discourse seeks to dismantle the condescending identifications and replace it with an “emancipatory and empowering” consciousness located in their alternative vision of society. Shekhar’s discursive rendering of the Adivasi voice challenges the way we read the South Asian literary discourse. The Indian mainstream ideologues through various discursive, political and other media construct an image of the “upper-caste Hindu male speaking a northern Indian language as the normative, unmarked Indian” (Chatterjee, *I Am the People* xviii) who has to continually and unfailingly safeguard the “Hindu India” from the “dangers” of the alternative civilizational narratives coming from the Adivasis, Dalits and other minority communities. As Partha Chatterjee argues, we see that the Indian dominant narrative is fraught with an exclusive idea of creating a permanent division between “the people” and “the enemy.” Mangal Murmu, a sixty-year-old Adivasi man in Shekhar’s story, is violently beaten by the state police and arrested for voicing the pain and suffering forced

upon them by the “dikus.” It is yet another manifestation of the state incarceration that we do not find represented in the mainstream narratives. Mangal Murmu’s arrest and confinement in police custody is the consequence of his questioning the dominant and daring to speak against injustice. Mangal Murmu’s refusal to perform in front of the President is not only a rebellion against the state that dispossess the Adivasis in the name of progress but also an interrogation of the dominant literary works’ voiceless Adivasis. Shekhar’s literary imagination not only intervenes in the hegemonically produced “immutable identities” but also denies “the process of reproducing their own degradation” (Aloysius, “Contextualising Backward Classes Discourse” 412).

Shekhar weaves his stories around the questions of Adivasi cultural dynamics which has always been antagonized by the mainstream cultural/literary representation. He invites the readers to read history differently and recognize the ongoing Adivasi cultural/political oppression to subvert the inferiorized Adivasi identity. Shekhar through Mangal Murmu’s voice asks:

We Adivasis will not dance anymore—what is wrong with that? We are like toys—someone presses our ‘ON’ button, or turns a key in our backsides, and we Santhals start beating rhythms on our tamak and tumdhak, or start blowing tunes on our tiriyo while someone snatches away our very dancing grounds. Tell me, am I wrong? (Shekhar 170)

The multinational companies, which flood into the areas rich in natural resources, inhabited and maintained by the tribal communities, pose a serious threat to the tribal cultures and communities that have existed there for centuries, even before the arrival of

the “Aryan” people in the Indian subcontinent.⁴³ The existence of the Adivasi communities is in question because of various cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic forces that function in lieu of the elite bourgeoisie to subjugate and erase them. The agenda of Hindu nation is translated and implemented in a circular way through an economic liberalism policy in Adivasi world. Felix Padel points out that “Adivasis displaced by a dam, factory or mine find not only that almost nothing they were promised materialises, but also that they have lost immeasurably in terms of food security and the former richness of their social life and natural environment” (Padel 155–56). Mangal Murmu’s disillusionment with the “development project” that has robbed the Adivasis of their possessions amounts to the resounding structural violence perpetuated against the “primitive” Adivasi communities which he represents and speaks for. Shekhar’s work lays bare the hollowness of modernity and its pretention of “civilizing mission” that subsequently enforces a permanent subjugation of the Adivasis, Dalits and other non-Hindus exactly as the early Aryan invaders who “kept the indigenous people permanently subordinated” (Thapar 7). In Shekhar’s title story, the Indian President visits the Santhali land to inaugurate a thermal power plant. The Santhals must continue their tradition of pleasing the higher authorities by presenting their traditional songs and dances. The President, present to inaugurate the power plant, seems to be oblivious of the situation of these Adivasi Santhals whose land is expropriated to build the thermal power plant and expects them to “please” him. The President too is complicit in the Santhals’ condition. It shows how unwilling the state is to hear the voice of the Adivasi communities and

⁴³ Romila Thapar, “The Theory of Aryan Race and India: History and Politics” (1996); Gail Omvedt, *Understanding Caste* (2011)

address their concerns. The state preaches the slogan of advancement while practicing the policy of displacement and deprivation of the Adivasis of their natural rights. Shekhar questions, “Which great nation displaces thousands of its people from their homes and livelihoods to produce electricity for cities and factories? And jobs? What jobs? An Adivasi farmer’s job is to farm” (Shekhar 185). The construction and operation of the thermal power plant brings an end to the Adivasi way of life. Shekhar underscores the problematic of the postcolonial Indian elite, which “retains the sense of colonial hierarchy which the British Raj established, along with the ‘Saheb Role’ of talking down to ‘inferiors,’ who pass this on with interest” (Padel and Das 433). Santhals refusal to surrender and perform their traditional song and dance in front of the President (a Brahmin President), not only dismantles the assumption of the upper caste/class elite bourgeois to control them as the puppets but also questions the dominant literary representation and its sanitized version of the Mother India. Shekhar’s work by “piercing the age-old silence, seeks to shatter the conventional enclosures, and *Luxman Rekhas* that have been drawn by the dominant” (Gupta 21). Shekhar’s text breaks these “sacred,” divisionary lines drawn by the dominant discursive framework to keep the Adivasis away from the Indian nationalist imaginary.

Shekhar’s discursive imagination transcends the divisionary lines of the upper caste/class dominant narratives and asserts Adivasi identity. Of course, all the upper caste/class writers cannot be equally blamed for propagating the Hindutva ideology and misrepresenting the Adivasis in South Asia. For instance, some upper caste writers, such as Mahasweta Devi and Ganesh Devy have been credited for “somewhat” representing the marginalized Adivasi voices. Though, Devi’s work mostly focusses on the tribals, and

seeks to “represent” their voice, Spivak, who has translated most of Devi’s work, critiques her for romanticizing the tribals. Spivak points out that “She [Devi] writes about . . . tribals but she is somewhat feudal. And . . . her image of the tribals is somewhat romanticized” (“Nationalism and the Imagination” 82). In this context, it is perhaps safe to say that most of the upper caste/class writers are complicit in the injustice perpetrated against the marginalized people and their silencing by not speaking against the condescending lens of the Hindutva ideology and the discrimination against the marginalized people. Shekhar’s is the representation of the Adivasis as speaking subjects, who can voice their differences and fight against the injustices. Though some of the Hindutva ideologues claim that the Aryan people are the “*Anadi*” people, enlightened ones having great culture and unique social order, and the rest of the people are the “*Mlechhas*” (Golwalkar 47), the recent archaeological discovery of the forty-five-hundred-year-old skeletons in Haryana, India (Frieese) unfolds the claim that the Dravidian people were the original inhabitants and rulers of this region further challenging the Hindutva ideologues⁴⁴ and their claim of the Aryan people as the indigenous people of India. The question of who the aboriginal or Adivasi in India is fraught with controversies. While the Hindutvites imagine the Aryan people as the original inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent, most of the Dalit and Adivasi

⁴⁴ M.S. Golwalkar, in *Bunch of Thoughts* (1966) argues that Aryan people were the “*anadi*,” without a beginning, “sometimes trying to distinguish out people from others, we were called “the enlightened”—the Aryas—and the rest, the *Mlechhas*” (47). V.D. Savarkar’s *Hindutva* (1923) defines “Hinduism,” “Hindutva” and the concept of “Hindu Rastra.”

writers/scholars⁴⁵ challenge this proposition and argue that tribal/Adivasi people are the true aboriginal people of India. However, the Adivasi scholar, Virginius Xaxa argues that the question of indigeneity is related to the aspects of marginalization rather than the historical realities: “Only those people that have been subjected to domination and subjugation have come to constitute the component of the indigenous people” ((Xaxa, “Tribes as Indigenous People of India” 3590). Whatever the case, the *Rig Veda*, the oldest document available thus far represents the non-Aryan people, who were later designated as the “Mlechhas” as barbaric, untouchable, and unworthy of any dignity and respect. Since then, the mainstream discourse continues to propagate the idea of permanent division between the Aryan and non-Aryan which later turned to be the Hindus and non-Hindus. It is therefore clear that the non-Aryan, non-Hindu identity becomes a major reason for their marginalisation and discrimination in the South Asian dominant literary/political imaginary. Though most of the colonized countries became “free,” at least politically, from the direct Western colonial control, the Other of the South Asian countries remain permanently colonized by the internal upper caste/class colonizers throughout history and continues to do so. Caste is either explicitly or implicitly present in the marginalization of various Dalit, Adivasi, and minority communities in South Asia. It is the major element in the formation and continuation of the Hindutva nation and the liberalist “developmental-material” projects. While the Hindutva project antagonizes the Dalits, the “developmental-material” project antagonizes the Adivasis, and the “Brahmin-Baniya” combine collaborate in the destruction and elimination of the subaltern voice. Adivasi voice emerges from these

⁴⁵ Phule, Teltumbde, Omvedt, Aloysius, Ilaiah

historical and material factors which consistently remained antithetical to the Adivasi cultural/political imagination and its existence. Shekhar unravels not only some of these historical wrongs but also the contemporary dominant discourse which still does not seem to acknowledge the Adivasi cultural/political imagination and existence as contributing and strengthening factors to the building of a modern nation.

CHAPTER FIVE

Naga Nationalism and the Question of Adivasi Autonomy in Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home*

The previous chapters show that literary writing in South Asian dominant framework has been overwhelmingly oblivious to the cultural conditions that emerge from beyond the Brahminical viewpoints and their casteist lens. In the systemically orchestrated idea of the “Hindu nation” of the postcolonial India, the dominant literary works reproduce and disseminate the essentialized high caste/class Hindu identity as the “Indian” identity and dismisses the minoritized, alternative imaginations which have challenged the “universalized” Indian identity and produced a wide range of discursive premises centered on the disenfranchised subaltern people. This chapter analyzes Temsula Ao's short story collection, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2007, henceforth referred to as *These Hills Called Home*) and demonstrates how Ao's text portrays a different world of the Adivasi Nagas in the “northeast” territories of India and interrogates the hegemonic dominant discursive/political framework which chooses to silence the Adivasi voice.

Ao, who comes from Nagaland, designated as one of the eight “northeast” states,⁴⁶ which have been marginalized not only in the political front in the postcolonial India, but also in the discursive paradigm, departs from the limited and biased representations of the Adivasi Naga people of the “northeast” territory, and their struggle

⁴⁶ Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim.

for freedom. She unpacks the fractured Naga psyche and their conflicts, confusions and complexities that have emerged from the “failed” freedom struggle and its atrocities in and outside the Naga cultural, geographical, and political locations in her story collection, *These Hills Called Home*. Ao also explores the Naga cultural nuances and their problematic in relation to caste, class, and gender. The Naga nationalism, which is placed against the mainstream “Indian” nationalism by the dominant discourse is at the centre of Ao’s work, which the nationalist and postcolonialist theoretical limits have “consciously” obliterated. Ao’s stories represent various dimensions of the marginalized Naga people in the backdrop of the Naga rebellion of the 1950s and the multipronged residues spilled over from the dream of freedom from the hegemony of the caste-ridden, postcolonial Indian state.

The homogenization of the “northeast” in the discursive, political, and geographical imagination denies the recognition of multitudes of cultures and communities, which are “strange” or “distant” from the dominant Indian conception of India. It is through the one-dimensional, totalizing lens that the mainstream discourse reconstructs an image of the “northeast” not only as a “backward” and “tribal,” but also as a “violence-ridden” (Oinam and Sadokpam 1) territory that poses a “serious threat” to the national unity and security. Bhagat Oinam and Dhiren A Sadokpam argue that “the disciplinary biases” and the “inability of the historians to put the region within a conceptually comprehensible framework and create connections” have reproduced the region as an “exception” and “with negative connotations” (6). In order to explore the “northeast” we need a nuanced reading of the narrative imagination of the “northeast” as the Other, placed against the Indian Self of the contemporary South Asian discourse

which consistently examines the Other as a subversion of the master narratives and distorts the minoritized epistemological assumptions as “inferior.” The inferiorized territories and people who inhabit these territories collectively articulate a resistance against the imposition of the “biased” reconstructions of the literary/cultural representations that the state institutions collaboratively design and implement. The literary and historiographical exclusion of the voices that emerge from the atrocities and injustices of the “distanced” communities shows an unwillingness of the dominant high caste/class elites to acknowledge the presence of a difference, let alone address the subaltern Adivasis’ questions and aspirations in the making of a more just and inclusive postcolonial nation-state. What is at the centre of the minoritized discourse is a challenge to subvert the legitimization of marginalization and occlusion of the alternative imaginations and rediscover the power of culture and identity. This is to place the agency of the Adivasi subjectivity at the centre of its aesthetic proposition. Ao, as a writer, is aware of her role to examine the “authenticity” and distortions of the cultural and political realities and to record the unheard voices “Lest We Forget.” She observes that “there is an inherent callousness in the human mind that tends to ignore injustice and inhumanity as long as it does not touch one directly” (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* IX). Probably, Ao’s critique points towards the community of writers who deliberately ignore the injustice and inhumanity perpetrated against the marginalized communities and claim to “represent” the nation. The “callousness” of the dominant literary circle is spread over its condescending approaches to the displacement and dispossession of the Naga cultural identity and to the Naga struggle for self-determination. Ao does not explicitly comment on any dominant school of thought but in her remark, we find an implicit presence of a

critique of the dominant literary discourse which erases the subaltern voices. As a professor of English, she must have taken into consideration the claims and outcomes of the postcolonial as well as the subaltern studies initiatives while observing the subaltern Naga's "disappointment and disillusionment," looked down upon merely as "ethnic violence" and "tribal issues" not worthy of any historiographical or literary examination. Ao reproduces the everyday reality of Naga territory ravaged by the Indian soldiers in the fictionalized form in her text perhaps because of the ongoing danger of persecution by the Indian soldiers, and distances herself from the risk of being tortured as we continue to hear the stories of brutality in the region by the Indian army. Postcolonial India has no room for the alternative viewpoints that question the nationalist Hindutva government and its systemic dispossession of the marginalized people.

The nationalist historiography engages in a systematic appropriation of the Other in the formation of the high caste/class elitist nationalism. In so doing, it subalternizes the discourses that stem from the local cultural resources and their genealogical trajectories, "empowering certain forms of knowledge while disempowering others" (Prakash 1485). Ao locates the disempowered Naga people at the centre of her literary imaginary and represents a fabric of Naga nationalism exploring the silenced people and their inferiorized cultural and political sites. Instead of reinscribing the "homogeneity" of the elite nationalists, Ao exposes its assumption of ambivalence and inability to acknowledge the existence of agency and subject position of the Nagas. The Subaltern Studies project, which claimed the exploration of the subaltern subject position as its main agenda, failed to achieve what it aimed for at the beginning of its initiatives. The claim to subvert the historiographical ellipsis in representing the subaltern agential subject unfortunately loses

its focus quite early in the Subaltern studies movement. The subaltern in South Asian elitist imaginary has been appropriated in relation to its subordination and inferior position which nevertheless is not constituted in the dominant discourse as an integral component of the nationalist domain. Ao's narrative challenges the marginalization of the subaltern Naga cultural/political presence and records their rebellion against the subordination of their homeland by the postcolonial Indian state. The dominant nationalist view about the other nationalisms and self-assertion movements entwines with the idea of the first prime minister of postcolonial India, Jawaharlal Nehru, about the Naga independence movement in 1950s. In a response to the Naga leader, Angami Zapu Phizo's proposal about their demands, Nehru says:

I consider freedom very precious. I am sure that the Nagas are as free as I am, in fact more free in a number of ways. For while I am bound down by all sorts of laws the Nagas are not to the same extent bound down by such laws and are governed by their own customary laws and usages. But the independence the Nagas are after is something quite different from individual or group freedom. In the present context of affairs both in India and the world, it is impossible to consider, even for a moment, such an absurd demand for independence for the Nagas. It is doubtful whether the Nagas realize the consequences of what they are asking for. For their present demand would lead them to ruin. (qtd. in Lintner 64)

The emergence of Naga nationalism, one of the first armed rebellions against the post-independence Indian state stems from the frustrations of the denial of the newly independent India to recognize and respect the Naga claim for their self-assertion and identity. Instead of respecting their desire to be autonomous, Nehru condemned their

demand as “absurd.” The other nationalists who follow continued the propagation of “absurd” legacy to the marginalized Nagas’ quest for identity. Ao’s work delves into the rupture that the Naga nationalist movement of the 1950s produces leaving behind not only the deep psychological implications but also material, political, cultural, and geographical disjunctions that the Nagas continue to experience in postcolonial India. Ao’s literary imagination takes us to an alternative nationalism of the “northeast” that emerges in the wake of the Indian independence from the British rule and poses a grievous threat to the high caste/class bourgeois nationalism. G. Aloysius calls it an “upper caste Brahminic nationalism” which undermines all other ideas of nationalism imagined to be the guiding force to self-assertions and autonomy of the marginalized peoples and places at the peripheries.

In the northeastern Adivasi imagination, the “northeast” region remained free of any “foreign” control except during the British rule in India, which “followed a policy of cautious non-interference towards the hill tribes, especially the Nagas. This was not, as the British later conveniently claimed, to “protect” the hill people from being exploited by the unscrupulous plainsmen but because the annexation of the hill areas was not considered profitable” (Misra, “The Naga National Question” 618). A postcolonial construct, the “northeastern” region in the Indian discursive imagination represents the “Other” whose movements for territorial integrity and self-determination are suppressed fiercely by the active military and paramilitary forces mobilized by the post-independence nationalist government since the declaration of the Naga independence just one day before India’s independence from the British control on August 15, 1947. Udayon Misra argues that the emergence of Naga nationalism in the “periphery” of

Indian nation-state challenges postcolonial India's claim for "unity." He points, "The idea of "one nation" which gathered strength during the freedom struggle, and which was buttressed during the years immediately following independence, received its first major jolt in the Naga Hills district of undivided Assam" (Misra, "The Margins Strike Back: Echoes of Sovereignty and the Indian State" 266). The Nagas enjoyed "considerable autonomy" even during the British rule. When the British decided to withdraw from the Indian subcontinent, the Naga leaders appealed the British authorities to grant them independence from the Indian rule. They argued that, "since the Nagas were historically, racially and culturally different from Indians and were never occupied by the Indian rulers, the Nagas should be granted freedom as a sovereign country once the British rule comes to an end" (Srikanth and Thomas 100–01). But when the Nagas realized that they were to be included within the Indian union and under the centralized Indian authority after the British left, they felt betrayed and came together as a Naga nation in opposition to the Indian nation state for safeguarding the "Naga way of life." As we see in Naga leader, Angami Zapu Phizo's remark about Naga cultural/political difference and their reluctance to join the Indian union, "Nagas were never Indians and will never be so" (Bhaumik 313). The injunction of a different nationalism that departs from the mainstream bourgeois nationalism therefore is at the centre of Adivasi imagination of this peripheral region which demands an alternative viewpoint to read and understand the discursive framework and its cultural, political, and historical realities.

Ao's recreation of the political conflicts engendered by the hegemonic Indian state represents the specificities of the Naga cultural/political world which is mediated first by the Christian missionaries and their slogan of "Nagaland for Christ," which

claimed to bring “the region and its inhabitants from ‘darkness to light’” (J. Thomas 6) during the colonial rule and by the Indian ruling elites who employed a similar viewpoint that the Nagas need to be “disciplined” and brought to light from the “backwardness” to embrace the Indian “national” culture built on the foundation of the Brahminical world order. Their conversion to Christianity does not make much difference in the way they revere their tradition. The Christian missionaries had entered the “northeast” territories during the colonial period with their “political” mission in theological garb to convert and constrict the Adivasis. By declaring themselves as the “moral guardians of the nation,” the mediation of these ecclesiastical bodies, according to John Thomas, “wrought with evangelical rhetoric and moral platitudes, had a certain politics aimed at keeping the status quo intact and, therein, serving the interests of the state and undermining the course of the movement” (J. Thomas 9). I believe that the religious ideologies have inherent “political” motives and cannot be examined in isolation. In the context of the “northeast” territories, the Christian religious institutions explicitly advocated for the state’s political agenda and undermined its own professed objective. When a “religious” movement actively propagates the agenda of the political, it becomes more dangerous in the Adivasi cultures as this tends to destroy not only the Adivasi belief system but also injects them with a political weapon with an inherent objective of aligning the converts towards the desired goal of the hegemonic state.

Ao’s narrative takes us directly to the war zone, as her subtitle, “Stories from a War Zone” suggests, in which she unpacks how the Naga revolutionaries confront the Indian state army and various proxies that the state finances and protects to suppress the Naga movement. What she brings to life is the ‘unwritten’ and ‘untold’ stories of

Mokokchung, a town which “was caught in the new wave of patriotic fervor that swept the imagination of the people and plunged them into a struggle, which many did not even understand” (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 2–3). In “The Jungle Major” Ao’s narrator familiarizes the reader with a new wave of nationalist fervor in Naga youths who are excited by the news of their peers’ encounters with the government forces and are interested to “join the new band of ‘patriotic’ warriors to liberate their homeland from ‘foreign’ rule” (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 3). The Naga youths who were not much affected by the Indian nationalist movement and were mostly untouched by its appeal have now been driven into the new wave of Naga nationalism which imagined their homeland to be an independent nation based on their cultural differences and historical conditions. As the villagers’ gossip about Punaba and Khatila’s childless marriage begins to produce adverse reactions in the village, the new wave of patriotism drives Punaba into its nationalist movement as he disappears from the town where he goes to work. He and many other Naga youths are badly affected by the unspeakable horrors of the Indian security forces, which not only employed many Nagas as “patronage” who were seriously implicated in various crimes and could operate as “gangs” against the “insurgents.” The forces also terrorized the local inhabitants indiscriminately: “The houses were ransacked by the security forces, the grain in their barns was burnt and the people themselves were herded into camps away from the village and kept in virtual imprisonment inside area fenced in by bamboo stockades” (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 3). When the innocent looking Punaba disappears, Khatila has to cover up his story of joining the rebels as she is aware of the dangers of any association with the revolutionaries. Khatila knows about the atrocities committed by the Indian security forces at first hand. Not long after

Punaba joins the underground forces, the government forces visit her house, and the officer threatens her that they will “treat” her in a “very special way” if she is found helping the “terrorists.” There were stories of rapes and murders by the security forces that Khatila is well aware of. Anyone at any time could become a suspect and be violently punished. Banu Bargu writes about “The markers of the identity that qualify individuals as targets; sometimes it is simply about belonging to a minority group—whether ethnic, racial, or religious—while at other times it is about having attachments to or playing a role in an ongoing political struggle that is threatening to the state, for a variety of causes” (47). Bargu further points out that the state categorizes these individuals as the enemy, “Whether [s/he] is called the “subversive,” the “insurgent,” the “terrorist,” or the “unlawful combatant,” this category is invoked as the grounding principle of the decision to deploy violence, which in turn reaffirms both the status of the target as the enemy and the necessity of vigilant punishment” (48). The Adivasis in the region are targeted randomly and anyone who comes across the Indian army’s surveillance is an enemy and is severely punished. Ao’s Khatila is committed to the cause of Naga independence and helps the underground warriors with a series of confidential tactics. She understands the danger of incarceration the moment she is caught helping the “antinationalists” who seek to dismantle the assumption that India is a “unitary,” “homogeneous” nation. As discussed earlier in this dissertation, the idea of India as a “homogeneous” nation stems from Golwalkar’s idea of Hindu nation and its premises which Nehru, Gandhi and other nationalists comfortably accelerated. The mainstream nationalism systematically and deliberately silences the Other ideas of nationalism which challenge the way upper caste nationalist framework interprets the alternative

imagination about the marginalized cultures and locations, mostly erased, otherwise footnoted in the historiographical records. Those who oppose the Gandhian-Nehruvian idea of nation are placed in opposition to the making of new India, and by extension regarded as “antinationalists” by the dominant discursive domain. The Naga youths in Ao’s literary recreation represent the oppositional stance to the hegemonic nationalism which fails to address the peripheral voices and acknowledge their desire to autonomy.

The Indian nationalist idea cannot include the invisibilized northeast people into its framework. What it does is force the subalternized Naga people to seek an alternative narrative of belonging and nationalism which subverts the mainstream nationalist agenda and its narrow homogenizing idea of the nation. Punaba and Khatila’s rebellion in “The Jungle Major” seeks to reinterpret the idea of nationalism in postcolonial India which is defined as an all-encompassing nationalist strand tailored towards the common good of the “subjugated” masses. But within this elite bourgeois nationalist ideology, the high caste/class elites re-emerge to consolidate the Brahminic social order with new tools to disempower the subaltern people and demonize the other forms of nationalism which take an oppositional stance against the dominant caste/class nationalism. Aloysius argues:

What came to be looked upon as the nationalist class was nothing but the disparate and traditionally dominant caste and communities gathered together in their interest to preserve their traditional dominance on the one hand over the lower caste masses, and to enlarge their area of dominance in the new political society on the other. (Aloysius, *Nationalism without a Nation in India* 221)

The ruling elites are invested in the appropriation of the Indian independence for the benefit of the dominant caste/class which is not interested in the transformation of socio-political circumstances of the subalternized masses.

Submission to the Indian nation-state for the northeastern Nagas is to accept the dominance of the new colonizers, the “foreigners” who are all set to impose their cultural/political assumption on the northeastern people. Sajal Nag argues that various historical, cultural and political conditions gave rise to the idea of Naga nationalism in which “They constructed a separate nationhood for the Nagas, invented the idea that they were never a part of India, highlighted that it was the British, and not the Indians, who had conquered them, and hence argued that with the exit of the British they had the right to revert to their pre-British independent status” (Nag, “Nehru and the Nagas: Minority Nationalism and the Post-Colonial State” 50). The alternative discourse that reconstructed the Naga selfhood based on its historical and cultural/political location, othered and demonized by the Indian nation state, overwhelmingly attracted the Naga youths who “abandoned family, school careers and even permanent jobs to join the band of nationalists to liberate the homeland from forces, which they believed, were inimical to their aspirations to be counted among the free nations of the world” (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 10). The emergence of the counter narrative in the northeastern region began to question, right from the beginning, the Indian independence and its limited trajectory which only serves the high caste/class collaborating castes and communities. Ao’s literary imagination explores the disjuncture of multiple nationalisms and their multidirectional exposures pertaining to the idea of India as a “homogeneous” nation-

state without a visible presence of the historically depressed communities, cultures, and locations.

The alternative view of the Naga nationalism in India empowers the disenfranchised northeast people and rejects the bourgeois nationalism not only challenging the “elitist biases” in defining the parameters of dominant nationalism but also subverting the mainstream discursive paradigm and its invisibilization of the subaltern’s aspiration and fight for their autonomy. According to Nag, the Indian nationalist movement, seen as a “unilinear” and “mono-dimensional” movement by ignoring the concerns of the peripheral communities failed to accommodate various forms of self-assertion movements led by peripheral, subalternized communities. The tendency of the mainstream historiography to equate the high caste/class nationalism as Indian nationalism creates a limited version of nationalism. Nag argues that the serious lapses in seeing the social, political, and geographical discontents in marginal locations demand an alternative narrative approach which could address the nuances of the peripheral concerns and prepare a significant ground for the emergence and consolidation of Naga nationalism. Nag suggests that there must be an alternative lens to look at the peripheral, marginalized voices because “a tendency of the ‘elitist’ historiography of Indian nationalism is to concentrate on Gandhian or Congress stream of nationalism and treat popular (peasant and tribal) movements as an ‘abnormal’ outgrowth, peripheral to the study of the development of the Indian nation” (“Multiplication of Nations? Political Economy of Sub-Nationalism in India” 1521). Ao’s stories attempt to represent this “abnormality” of the alternative nationalism that Nag points to.

Ao's narratives highlight not only the pain of cherishing an alternative nationalism against the dominant one but also a tumultuous journey through which the Nagas' desire for freedom and identity vis-à-vis independence shattered. The mainstream postcolonial, nationalist and subalternist discourses fail to acknowledge and address the deliberate subalternization and the shattered psyches that the peripheral Indian communities experience, not only during the British rule but also in postcolonial India. The binaries that the postcolonial literary theory employs in order to study the nuances of the "third world" literature cannot explore the ways in which the subalternized northeastern people and locations in India understand their history and experience life under pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial circumstances. The colonizer/colonized binary that places the European colonizers as one category and the "Indian" as the other is a grossly inaccurate and totalizing approach that does not recognize the "colonized" within the colonial and postcolonial settings and locations. The Indian mainstream historiography positions the Adivasis living in the northeast territories as the "Other" of the dominant groups whether it is the British colonizers, or the high caste/class Indian "colonizers" emerged after the Indian independence. Unfortunately, the subalterns are not represented in any of the dominant narratives that are controlled and disseminated by the high caste/class elitist bourgeoisie and its narrow lens.

Ao's narrative reflection on the other hand stems from the perpetual denigration of the peoples and locations framed as the Other of the dominant high caste/class ruling elites of India and their false discursive paradigms. Ao's narrativization of the peoples and places subjected to state violence and terror exposes the real face of the Indian high caste/class elites whose essentialist assumption of the territories peopled by the Adivasis

represents a negation in the making of postcolonial India. Because Nehru, Gandhi and other nationalists see the northeastern territories as integral part of the Indian union and the subalterns' rebellions for their autonomy was forcefully muted in the nationalist domain, the "autonomous" peoples living in these hinterlands continue to resist the ways through which they are subjected to subjugation and displacement. Ao's stories underpin the thrust of the conflict and the resistance to the dominant knowledge construction of the territories as "India's trouble" from the eyes of the characters who participated one way or the other in the "war" against postcolonial India in the making of their identity and claiming the ownership of their land.

"The Curfew Man" directly delves into the plight of the people in a war zone who have been trapped between two warring forces who are guided by the opposing ideas of nationalism. The narrator says, "Everything had been plunged into a state of hostility between two warring armies; the one overground labelling the other as rebels fighting against the state and the other, operating from their underground hide-outs and calling the Indian army illegal occupiers of sovereign Naga territories" (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 34). Ao presents a grim picture of the villagers who are deprived of the fundamental human rights of getting to hospital when sick, buying food or going to schools, churches, or other places to meet their basic needs. Because the Indian state has imposed the routine curfew for months to "track" down the "enemies," the life of the ordinary citizens is jeopardized. Indiscriminate searches on people trying to carry out their everyday activities, even on the emergency patients trying to get to the hospital, the abuses and humiliation continue to disrupt the Naga territories where "civilians were shot dead by the patrol parties after curfew and their deaths reported as those of underground

rebels killed in ‘encounters’ with the army” (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 34). Giordino Agamben argues that in such “extreme situations “force of law” floats as an indeterminate element that can be claimed both by the state authority ... and by a revolutionary organization ...” (38–39). There have been several reports of consistent violation of human rights⁴⁷ in the northeastern region at the hands of the security forces to suppress the Adivasi Nagas’ self-assertion movement. The Indian independence which was fought and achieved in the name of freedom and equality for all benefitted only the high caste/class elites and turned out to be even more suppressive than the British colonial state of the Adivasis, Dalits and other minorities which have been historically marginalized in South Asia. Gandhi who is considered to be a messiah of non-violence “did not oppose the Indian army’s use of arms” (De 163) to suppress the Adivasis who raised their voice against the experience of colonization continued even after the Indian independence. The Adivasis Nagas had no choice but to struggle for their equality and freedom, which in many cases led to violent resistance against the postcolonial nationalist government. Gandhi and Nehru were hard bent against any idea of nationalism that would contradict the elitist version of India that envisions high caste Hindu nationalism as the Indian nationalism. According to David Hardiman:

The Gandhian approach to Adivasis tended to focus on their education into citizenship. There was much less emphasis on the need to struggle for their rights within the polity through Satyagraha. The process of education brought limited gains for a few Adivasis, but it failed to bring the more general emancipation that

⁴⁷ Chenoy, Kamal Mitra. “Nationalist Ideology, Militarization and Human Rights in the Northeast.” 34-35

was hoped for. For most Adivasis, their experience since Indian independence was one of displacement, marginalization and exploitation. (*Gandhi: In His Time and Ours* 153)

The question of emancipation of the Adivasis for the Gandhian nationalists as Hardiman understands is to assimilate them into accepting the dominant form of nationalism. The meeting of the Naga delegates with Gandhi and Nehru with their demand of independence from India further estranged the Nagas from their hope of gaining emancipation. Gandhi said that “Personally, I believe you all belong to me, to India” (qtd. in 163 De) without acknowledging the fact that the Adivasi Nagas come from a different historical, cultural, and political circumstances that cannot entwine with the high caste Hindu idea of nation that Gandhi was vouching for. In a response to a letter, Gandhi in *Young India* argues that that “If it is brute force that is to rule, then the millions of India must learn the art of war, or must forever remain prostrate at the feet of him who wields the sword, whether he is *pardesi* or *swadeshi*” ((Gandhi 581). However, he does not seem to be concerned with the “*swadeshi*” rulers who wield the sword and suppress the dispossessed, colonized subalterns. Gandhi’s silence on the atrocities committed against the Adivasis cannot simply be overlooked. Many of Ao’s characters are forced to join the revolutionaries as the Independent India and its democratic government continued to suppress their voice for freedom through the military boots. But their dream of independence from India remains at bay when the revolutionaries themselves fail to pursue their goal and engage in anti-civilian activities.

Ao’s stories are equally critical of the underground forces and their violation of the basic human rights of the civilians. We see that the state army’s rampant killing of the

civilians and the impunity with which they carry out their violence in the "northeast" territories totally disregard the rule of law. On the other hand, the rebels' power and ability to exterminate not only the state forces but also the internal opposition (real or assumed) within the organizational structure attests to Agamben's claim that the juridico-political system under such conditions "transforms itself into a killing machine" (86). While the extra judicial killing by the Indian army is common in this conflict zone, the insurgents' involvement in extortions, ransom and hostility towards the villagers shed light on a different picture of an unprecedented violence and terror enacted on to the northeast people by the freedom fighters themselves.⁴⁸ Ao's short story, "Shadows" describes one of the terrifying incidents in which a high-ranking rebel officer, Hoito, traps a young recruit, Imli, in his elaborate and sophisticated plan and leaves him to die mercilessly in the middle of a jungle in order to avenge his rage against the young boy's father, a senior officer in the headquarters of the underground forces. Imli, who happens to arrive right at a time when a new unit is being finalized for training with the foreign rebels across the border, falls under the suspicion that he is registered at the last minute without the prequalification required for the unit because of his father's position and power. Hoito's grudge against Imli is inflamed further by a dream he has in which Hoito's dead father appears and warns him not to share his food with any stranger from the special wooden plate that Hoito got from his father. The narrator explains, "It was as if the humiliation that he felt when he was reprimanded by Imli's father in public came back to him renewed manifold through his own father's accusation about the 'stranger' in his dream" (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 75). The raised eyebrows of the other members

⁴⁸ Baruah, Sanjib. *In the Name of the Nation*.

of the unit gives Hoito one more reason to believe that he must get rid of Imli “without raising any suspicion in the minds of his soldiers” (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 75).

The story portrays Imli’s situation as similarly impacted by the war. He cannot continue his studies in the town because of the ongoing war and his responsibility to his ailing mother left alone at home. Imli too is driven to fight against the “outsiders” when he comes to his village. Even though his father goes strongly against Imli’s idea of joining the underground force, Imli’s determination defeats him. Using Imli’s case as an example, Ao unpacks how the underground forces too are engaged in various inhuman activities that they claim to fight against. Kailash Baral argues that the marginalized literature “contests and problematizes some of the universalistic assumptions of literature while factoring in and often valorizing the unique ethnic and cultural experience that needs to be critically evaluated” (5). Baral’s take in relation to marginalized literature seems to be totalizing as his sweeping remark undermines the specificities of the marginal voices that unhesitatingly interrogate the ethnic and cultural experiences that need critical examination. I observe that all the writers I examine in this dissertation offer critical analysis of their ethnic and cultural communities. For instance, Sharan Kumar Limbale exposes the degradation and internal conflicts of Dalit leadership and the complexities engendered by conversion while Bama portrays how the Dalit women are also the victims of the Dalit men. Hansda Sowvendra Shakhar faces various threats for being “derogatory” to Santhal women and for portraying the Adivasis in “bad light.” Ao’s writing problematizes the universalist assumptions of the dominant literary tradition just as the Dalit and Adivasi writers mentioned above. She does not valorize the ethnic experience as Baral’s comment suggests but problematizes and critically evaluates the

Adivasi Naga ethnic and cultural experiences. She does not glorify the Naga rebellion. Instead, she explores its various dimensions and exposes the lawlessness within the rebel forces, and the corruption of power that engulfs the Naga rebels. As the aged Roko in “Shadow” tells the youngsters of his village, remembering his friend Imli, “When you have a gun in your hand, you cease to think like a normal human being” (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 85). Thus, Ao’s ambivalent portrayals of Naga rebels challenge totalizing analyses of critics like Baral that fail to grasp that Dalit and Adivasi writers, while portraying the victimage of their communities by the violence perpetrated against them by the high class and caste India nationalist order, also interrogate the internal contradictions.

On the other side of the spectrum, Ao’s stories highlight the atrocities perpetrated against the women and children in the Naga Hills by the “invading” Indian army and its allies. Barbarity perpetrated against the women in the “northeast” shows how the Indian government is complicit in various crimes committed against the Adivasi women. Indian government enacted various oppressive laws such as Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Prevention Act (1955), National Security Act (1980) and the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (1967), which “target any attempt at self-determination, autonomy, and independence by giving the Indian armed forces unrestricted impunity to kill, torture, incarcerate, harass, and violate civilians and suspected insurgents alike under the guise of protecting the tenets of democracy” (Mehta 58). These and many other “Acts” the state used for containing and defeating the self-determination movements of the Adivasi Nagas become the easy tools for the security forces to invade the Adivasi women’s personal and

social territories. Duncan Mcduic-Ra outlines the details of how the women's bodies become the sites of violence in the region:

Rape by armed forces personnel has been widely documented and this includes rape after forced entry into homes, rape at gunpoint, rape of women in captivity arrested on suspicion of links with insurgents, rape of school-aged girls on their way to or from school, and the abduction and subsequent rape of women and girls from their homes, including gang rape. In many cases, women have been raped in front of other family members, including children, who were held at gunpoint by other member of the armed forces. (332)

Ao's short story, "The Last Song" documents the unspeakable horror that her characters suffer at the hands of the antagonist forces overwhelmingly present in their territories. The whole village congregated at the Church for Christmas celebration is attacked by the Indian army for the "crime" they committed by paying the "taxes" to the underground "government." While the whole congregation gets trapped under the "killing machine" and begins to disperse, the choir continues singing. The best singer in the village, Apenyo, "oblivious of the situation as if an unseen presence was guiding her" keeps "singing her heart out as if to withstand the might of the guns her voice raised to God in heaven" (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 26–27). The captain gets incensed and enraged by this act of defiance. What follows next is the unthinkable. Apenyo is dragged away to an old Church nearby and when her mother, Libeni arrives searching for her daughter, "the young Captain was raping Apenyo while a few other soldiers were watching the act and seemed to be waiting for their turn" (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 28). When the mother tries to get her daughter off the captain, she too is pinned down and raped by the soldiers.

The group of soldiers are found mounting even on the dead body of the woman. When the soldiers realize that some people might have witnessed this, they open random fire and set the Church on fire to destroy the evidence completely. The carnage spreads through the entire village where the houses, granaries and other structures are burnt to the ground. The narrator muses, “The cries of the wounded and the dying inside the church proved that even the house of God could not provide them security and save them from the bullets of the crazed soldiers” (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 29). This is an example of one site among many in the Naga Hills that manifests how postcolonial India’s “peace” project at work becomes a major source of death and destruction for the local Adivasi inhabitants.

This narrative also reflects upon the power of storytelling that humanizes and reproduces the past that the dominant discourse deliberately evades. Thomas King in *The Truth About Stories* reminds us that stories create our existence. He says, “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (T. King 2). Ao reemphasizes the power and importance of the story telling tradition in the Adivasi Naga life that not only historicizes the past that marks the painful memories but also empowers the present and encourages the Naga youths to embrace the tradition as an integral part of their Adivasi identity. The storyteller in “The Last Song” sitting by the hearth-fire with a group of students digs into the past reminding the youths to explore and understand their culture. The storyteller laments the attitude of the present generation who have been influenced by the “alien” ways of life and forgotten their tradition. She is frustrated because the “youngsters of today have forgotten how to listen to the voice of the earth and the wind” (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 32). It is only because of the storyteller that the voice of the daughter

and the mother murdered by the Indian soldiers inside the Church after they are raped and killed survives. The mighty Indian soldiers erased the evidence of rape and murder, and the Naga tradition did not allow them to be buried with the ancestors because of their “unnatural” deaths. The narrator in “The Last Song” muses:

Today these gravesites are two tiny grassy knolls on the perimeter of the village graveyard and if one is not familiar with the history of the village, particularly about what happened on that dreadful Sunday thirty odd years ago, one can easily miss these two mounds trying to stay above ground level. The earth may one day swallow them up or rip them open to reveal the charred bones. No one knows what will happen to these graves without headstones or even to those with elaborately decorated concrete structures inside the hallowed ground of the proper graveyard, housing masses of bones of those who died ‘natural’ deaths. (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 31)

The author seems to be anxious about the loss of history and the inability of the younger generation to retrieve its message for the present. The question of why the dreadful event snapped away the beautiful singer and her mother together with many other innocent villagers remains unanswered. The storyteller consistently asks her young audience to pay attention to the sound of the wind coming from the unmarked graveyard now turned into a grass field. The narrator describes, “The storyteller and the audience strain to listen more attentively and suddenly a strange thing happens as the wind whirls past the house, it increases in volume and for the briefest of moments seems to hover above the house” and the force “resumes its whirling as though hurrying away to other regions beyond human habitation.” The young listeners are “stunned because they hear the new element

in the volume and a certain uncanny lilt lingers on in the wake of its departure” (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 32). What Ao through the storyteller implies is the value that the stories bring to the lives forgotten and erased from the historiographical documents. Ao also exposes the Naga youth’s indifference to the cultural/historical values and the cultural deterioration that the new “modern” ways of life bring to the community. She reinforces the importance to understand the nuances of Naga life only through which they will be able to find their cultural location. In postcolonial India’s historiography only the stories of the powerful people are recorded. The stories of the marginalized and the victimized are erased and the subaltern voices are silenced.

Ao’s stories are centered around the people who have been antagonized by the postcolonial Indian state and whose epistemologies and discourses have been displaced by the dominant discursive and institutional apparatuses. The dominant discursive lens appropriates the nationalist Hindutva slogans, such as “vande mataram,” or “Jay Shri Ram” as the-representative ideas of the nation with the deliberate omission of the specificities of the Adivasi cultural identities and the erasure of the atrocities committed on them under the postcolonial government’s “legal” garb. The Indian nationalist discourse is void of not only the pain and suffering of the dispossessed but also of the philosophies, myths, cultures, histories, and everyday realities that the subaltern people experience. In other words, their side of stories. The stories Ao writes bear the brunt of a long history of dispossession and antagonism that the Adivasi Naga experience as they continue to live within a so called “largest democracy” in the world. Chinua Achebe likes to be hopeful for the twenty first century as it begins the “process of “re-storying” peoples who had been knocked silent by the trauma of all kinds of dispossession”

(Achebe 79). Achebe is talking in relation to the extremities of the Western colonialism that corrupted and dispossessed the non-Western world. However, the thrust of his discontent is towards the hegemonization of the dominant literary discourse in creating contempt and negation of the “Other” cultural identities, and towards the “The Danger of a Single Story” as in Chimamanda Anguchi Adichi’s strong rebuttal to the one-sided story of the “powerful,” dominant people. Ao’s stories are about plurality: within the Nagas themselves and within the Indian nation state. While the postcolonial Indian state claims to have provided freedom and equality to all its citizens, Ao’s stories tell of a brutal, genocidal repression. Ao’s characters not only narrate the brutalities and the contempt they experience in the contemporary world in their homeland but also the historical/mythical past that humanizes the Adivasis and empowers them to reclaim their identity.

Ao’s narratives emanate from her place of “belonging” and the Adivasi Naga culture. The Naga revolution Ao describes in her stories stems from the angst of being dispossessed from their land and culture, with the promise of reclaiming the old Adivasi order in the “war” imposed northeastern part of India. The legacy of oral tradition is integral to Adivasi, indigenous cultures as opposed to the Euro-centric literary tradition, in which “the oral form is generally identified with the illiterate and even the ‘uncivilized’” according to Ao. While the “written” forms seem to make the “oral” redundant, we find the “continuity of the oral tradition in the writings of indigenous people about their native philosophy, religious beliefs and the ‘new literature’ that was created out of the vast resources of the oral tradition” (Ao, “Writing Orality” 100). The power of storytelling is reemphasized in Ao’s story, “An Old Man Remembers,” which

narrates not only how the horrors of “war” transformed the Naga life but also the nostalgia of the youthful days of the two old men who have fought in the “war” together for the “Naga cause.” The old man, Sashi is broken by the death of his lifelong friend, Imli who had been an integral part of his life journey which takes them carry weapons against the Indian state to “save” their people and land and turns them into ruthless killers at the mere age of sixteen. This trauma of murders and violence they committed remains a festering wound that increases Sashi’s restlessness in his old age. He releases his untold story of “war” to his grandson’s question, “Grandfather, is it true that you and grandfather Imli killed many people when you were in the jungle?” (*These Hills Called Home* 52). He is awe struck by this question and remains completely disturbed for many days before he begins to unpack the days he and his friend spent in the jungle. Sashi painfully reflects, “Our youth was claimed by the turbulence, which transformed boys like Imli and me into killers. Yes, we did kill many people but the truth is that till today I cannot say how I feel about that, which sometimes makes me wonder if I have turned into a monster” (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 111). Sashi’s inability to make sense of the larger realities that engulf the innocent Naga youths manifests not only the helplessness of the common people but also how the dominant power trivializes the human values for the political agenda and turns them into a “killing machine.”

Ao’s visceral details of the “war” through Sashi’s retelling of his story testify not only to the horrors of the massacre of countless people in the “war” but also the destruction of cultural, political, and economic structures that sustain the Adivasi Nagas’ identity in the region. Ao’s literary reproduction of the historical reality interrogates both warring forces which have appropriated the nationalist agenda to destroy the “enemies”

and establish their agenda of nationalism. The Adivasi Naga's "war" against the external forces was claimed to be for the sake of their culture and identity, but it turned out to be completely devastating and destructive of the way that the Nagas dreamt about their identity and autonomy before going to the war with the postcolonial Indian state. Sashi and Imli have no choice but to join the underground force to save their lives at an age when they are cherishing their teenage dreams. Sashi remembers the day when they had to run to the jungle to save their lives from the Indian soldiers' massive shooting of the innocent villagers while returning home from school. Leaving the wounded and the dead in the village they disappear into the jungle only to be found by the underground soldiers who recruit and train them to fight against the Indian soldiers. Thus, these young lads become a part of the underground movement that is set to defeat the Indian military. Even though their rebellion is claimed for the "Naga cause" it seems to derail from its main agenda as various cases of violence and atrocities by the rebels resurface again and again in the Naga territories. The extremities that Sashi describes manifest the horrors of death and destruction that the confrontation of the two forces create in the Adivasi land. The story is full of gruesome scenes: "his father's battered body lying so helplessly in the dust of the ravaged village," "Five bodies lay sprawled on the mud floor now turned black with their blood," "we inflicted heavy casualties on a small convoy of four or five jeeps"—which demonstrate the senselessness of "war." Sashi reflects that the deaths and destructions "were becoming increasingly irrelevant to our way of thinking and it was only when our side suffered casualties that we thought of the dead and the wounded" (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 109). Both the "governments" ignore the fact that the forces' engagements in various atrocities and injustice victimized the inhabitants of the

“war” zone who need justice. Sashi and Imli were involved in many incidents of extortion, and killings for which they are never brought to fair trial for their “extra-judicial” crimes. Sashi is captured by the Indian army and jailed for his involvement in the “antinational” activities, but he is never tried for the horrible crimes he committed while fighting for the Naga Hills’ autonomy. Ao digs into the reality of violence and atrocities that the common people are subjected to even if these incidents have happened during the “war.” Ao perhaps attempts to ask the violators of human rights to account for the crimes they commit hidden behind the rhetoric of “war” and “freedom” and bring the culprits to fair trial. It is the postcolonial Indian nationalist government which has dispossessed the Nagas and forced them to raise weapons against the attempt of “external” control of their territory. Ao also invites the revolutionaries to recognize and address the prevalence of evil within them. Sashi’s remorse perhaps only helps him heal the deep-seated wound that shattered his life and his fellow men beyond repair, but his narrative does not have any clear indication that might lead towards the possibility of redress and reconciliation of the “war” victims.

"An Old Man Remembers" also underpins the effect of trauma narrative on the grand child whose innocent but piercing question troubles Sashi for many days before he finally gathers courage to speak about his days with the rebelling forces. Sashi’s release of his traumatic past perhaps gives him some relief from the burden of hiding a festering wound in him and provides an opportunity to his grandson to learn their history. However, the impact of trauma story in the child permanently scars the innocent mind and damages his psychological wellbeing. The Naga children have not only heard and witnessed the atrocities on an everyday basis, but they also have been forced into being

active agents of violence in the region. Sashi and Imli joined the underground rebels as children and involved in murders and various kinds of atrocities at an age when they were not able to understand the meaning and implications of what they were doing. Sashi lives with the painful memories of murders, extortions, and the brutalities they committed and witnessed during their days with the rebelling force, unable to hide “the inner turmoil” as he often “groaned and moaned and sometimes would wake up crying and screaming because of his bad dreams” (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 94). Sashi is one among many rebels who live with trauma experienced during the “war.” The “war” for independence continues even today and children are at risk from both sides: the rebels, and the state soldiers. It is not just the traumatic stories of atrocities that the Naga children hear but they are often forced to join the rebels and thus trapped into the prolonged “war” ripping of their childhood. Ao’s stories show that the children are not protected but exposed to the warfare at a time when they need to go to school and enjoy their childhood. The postcolonial Indian government does not have priorities to protect the children in the conflict zones.

The strategy of distancing that Ao implies in her stories by using aged narrators who have lived with their trauma silently for a whole life and can speak of it only in their last days indicates that they must choose to a safety zone because to speak against the ongoing troubles is risky for them. Naga resistance is still going on and military remains on Naga territory as a brute force. The Indian army continues to kill the Nagas in fake encounters and pass on their deaths as due to accident. In one of the recent incidents the Indian army killed six coal miners returning to the village and “the army maintains that

the botched up operation was a “case of mistaken identity.””⁴⁹ Seven others were killed in the protests following the incident. And for Ao to pinpoint the brutalities explicitly would be to “invite” danger to her life, therefore through the fictionalized forms of the ongoing troubles in her stories she distances herself from the danger of being victimized. It is for the reader to understand that the removal of Adivasis from the villages, killing of them in “encounters,” and raping of Adivasi women go on in today’s postcolonial India.

The “war” devastated majority of the Adivasi inhabitants in the northeastern territory while some people emerged as “the third force in the power equation between the two warring armies” (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 123) and immensely benefitted from it. The short story, “A New Chapter” highlights the emergence of a new class of Nagas who exploited the opportunity of “war” to climb the economic and political ladder very quickly by means of various activities through “official” channels. In a war ravaged territory which is set to restart the “normal” life after a decade of conflict, a new band of army contractors “were poised to make their fortunes from the spoils of the war” (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 123). Everything has changed for the Adivasi Nagas. Old social-political structures are already destroyed and replaced by new ones, which are alien to the Adivasi Nagas. The narrator muses, “Slowly and painfully Nagas were beginning to look at themselves through new prisms, some self-created and some thrust upon them. Those who survived, learnt to adopt to the new trends and new lifestyles. Old loyalties became suspect as new players emerged and forged makeshift alliances in unfamiliar political spaces” (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 122). In the muddled waters of the northeast, the new characters emerge looking for ways to quench their thirst for

⁴⁹ [Nagaland: Indian state tense after killing of 14 civilians - BBC News](#), 6 December 2021

wealth and power. Bendangnungsang, called Nungsang is one of them who starts his “business” with the smaller “outpost contracts” with the Indian army and soon establishes his “connection” and secures the headquarter contracts. Once he amasses wealth, he turns to politics and becomes an MLA. With his special connection to the state soldiers and the underground rebels, Nangsung goes uninterrupted in his fraudulent work and establishes his financial and political estate. Instead of ensuring equal opportunities for all, the postcolonial Indian government provides a ground for corruption, fraudulence and various other uncouth ways of exploitation and suppression of the people at the margin. Nangsung’s business thrives while the small suppliers, such as Abdul Sattar and Karim, lose their business because of the threats and non-payments for the orders they fill for Nangsung. When Nangsung gets elected as MLA their hope of getting the money Nangsung owes them ends. Nangsung gets the “right” advice and support for his business and politics from Bhandari, a member of a non-Adivasi Nepali community which is settled in the Naga territory after the British provided them land for fighting the World War. Bhandari’s support is not for free: “He would press the new legislator to spearhead the introduction of a bill to recognize his tribe as an indigenous group in the state” (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 141), which ensures that his people get the various government benefits allocated for the indigenous communities. Caste does not seem to have a major impact on the Naga Adivasi society but the intrusion of the “outsiders” such as “Assamese or Bengali doctors, or teachers, Marwari and Bihari traders, Nepali settlers” (*These Hills Called Home* 10) into the Naga cultural, political, and geographical locations has not only resulted in further division of the Naga communities but also contributed to the hegemonic Indian government’s systemic act of dispossession and displacement of

the Nagas from their land, culture, and identity. Ao's "A New Chapter" demonstrates that the collision and the collusion of these "outsiders" with the Adivasi Nagas have contributed to the dispossession of the Naga culture and identity.

Ao's characters are not equipped with extraordinary powers who do magical activities and take us through the illusionary, romantic flights and rescue human beings from various ailments of life like the mainstream bourgeois writers. The larger-than-life characters for Ao's literary conscience cannot give the validation to the ordinariness of life because she believes that literature should talk about "people and life in general." In her memoir, *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags*, she asserts that the most important ingredient of writing is "that literature be relevant to life." Ao considers the ordinariness of life so important to her writing that for the "peripheral" writers like herself, the demand to fulfil the expectations of the reading public and the "politics" of branding bestsellers or market hype after "prizes" become less relevant than to represent life's ordinariness "that challenges us and pits us against enormous odds" (Ao, *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags* 229–30). It is in this sense that Ao's work resonates with the voice of the Dalit writers whose "life-writing" not only challenges the way dominant literature represents life but also deconstructs the assumption of universality that delegitimizes the specificities of ordinary individuals who are susceptible not only to weaknesses and fallibility but also to selfishness and violence given the circumstances. Ao's characters are not the individualist superheroes who often navigate through time and space, but the common folks who are engulfed by the circumstances forced upon them by the external factors beyond their lifeworld and must confront and negotiate with these circumstances for their survival and identity.

At the centre of Ao's literary imagination, the "ordinary" subjects appear as the most important realities of Naga life which is not only fractured by the "external" political, cultural, and economic forces but also by the limitations of the Naga patriarchy which resurfaces in every aspect of Naga life. Ao's writing problematizes the Naga patriarchal values which degrades women and considers them as lesser human beings. Though Adivasi women exercise more power in and outside their homes than the upper caste women, the Naga patriarchy limits their freedom and denies them equality. Imnala in "The Night" suffers from the societal and familial stigma for being an unwed mother in Naga society. Young Imnala, already a mother of an out-of-wedlock daughter, falls for another young man, Alemba's advances and his lustful approaches as he visits her father, a respected *gaunbura*, the village leader, with a proposal of partnership in business. Though the frequency of his visits raises suspicion in the eyes of the villagers, the father does not consider his visits as something other than related to their business partnership. The second pregnancy out of wedlock brings apprehensions and recrimination to Imnala's already questionable existence in the Naga society. The worry that troubles Imnala is about the lack of "social insurance," the "acknowledged patriarchy" provides to the children for a recognition in the Adivasi Naga society (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 56). There are instances of cruelties, such as chopping off the hair and stripping off the clothes of the victims to shame them in similar circumstances as of Imnala in which an unwed mother must face the village council comprised of only men. Ao's stories do not demonstrate the discriminations based on the caste hierarchy in Naga society, but the discrimination against women replicates the upper caste Hindu patriarchy and its dictates that govern women's bodies and minds. Unhappy Imnala's

mother recalls her mother, “Remember, in our society a woman must have the protection of a man even if she happens to be blind or lame. A woman alone will always be in danger” (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 53). This is reminiscent of the dictates of Hindu scripture, the *Manu Smriti*, the Laws of Manu, which denigrates women and considers them as the property of their male relatives. The patriarchal authority in Adivasi Naga society as well does not seem to be just to women as it undermines their autonomy trapping them within the scope of male control. Brind J. Mehta argues:

Misogynist ideals of ethnic, national, familial, and communal honor are inscribed on the bodies of women who must preserve the patriarchal values of honor, chastity, virtue, and purity within the male-centered constructions of home and nation. Ironically, their gendered and social locations dispossess them as honorable citizens of the nation through the dishonorable deeds of male nationalist and warmongers in both the centre and periphery of India. (Mehta 58)

There may not be a direct link between the *Manu Smriti* to Naga culture, but their interactions with the high caste people perhaps provided the Naga men the resources to govern and dictate to their women. Meneno Vamuzo points out that “The deeply patriarchal Naga society has been further reinforced over the years through encounters with the colonial presences, such as the British administrators, American missionaries, and now the Indian government, all of which are cultures with strongly patriarchal roots” (Vamuzo 5). Imnala’s grandmother’s remark in “The Night” replicates what the *Manu Smriti* says about women:

पिता रक्षति कौमारे, भर्ता रक्षति यौवने ।

रक्षन्ति स्थबिरे पुत्रा न स्त्री स्वातन्त्र्यमर्हति ॥ (Ancient Indian Law: Eternal Values in Manu Smriti 33)

Ao lays bare the oppressive Naga patriarchy and some of the ways through which Naga men limit their women's personal and social spaces. Men are not found guilty, and it is the women who are put on trials and given punishments. Apenyo and her mother in "The Last Song" are buried outside the perimeter of the village graveyard and without the headstones invoking the Naga tradition, "'We are still Nagas, aren't we? And for us some things never change.'" Though Naga "tradition" could be invoked if the murdered ones were men, the gendered and therefore an inferior position of women in Naga culture is reflected through the revocation of the murdered women's identity from the Naga cultural collectivity.

However, some Adivasi Naga women in Ao's stories dare to stand strong and subvert the "traditional" images of the Naga women. Khatila, in "The Jungle Major," is a representation of hundreds of women in the "war" situations in which they become the most important people for the revolutionaries. Khatila's defiance against the Indian army's attempt of interrogation and their design to capture her visiting husband at her home attest to the fact that she is not a woman who is expected to be weak and submissive. Any gesture of Punaba's presence at home could jeopardize not only their lives but also the entire community for harbouring the "enemy" of the state. She is aware of the possible threats to her life as well as sexual abuse, but her confidence and ability to skillfully avoid the enraged army subverts the way that the Naga "tradition" expects the Naga women to be. She "foiled a meticulously planned 'operation' of the mighty Indian army and . . . a prized quarry had simply walked away to freedom" (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 7). The army captain "had expected to see a cowering woman, crazy with fear for her husband and herself" but "he was confronted by a dishevelled but defiant

person who displayed no agitation and seemed to be utterly oblivious to any danger” (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 6). Jemtila in “A New Chapter” ultimately “cleanses” herself off the image of “pumpkin Jemtila” and restarts her life with a new vigor as she understands how she is exploited by her cousin, Nangsung, now an “elected” MLA. Ao’s stories on the one hand demonstrate that in Naga society women are forced to live within the gendered space and are often subjected to various forms of discrimination, and on the other hand there are women who transcend the traditional limitations attached to them and confront the obstacles posed against their way.

Postcolonial India deprives Adivasi children of school, nutrition and most importantly their childhood. Sentila in “The Pot Maker” is forced to work for the family and look after her ten months old baby brother. Instead of going to school Sentila has to take the burden of carrying her little brother on her back and follow a long trail to learn pot making. She is expected to follow her family tradition of weaving. The parents would be fined for not being able to impose the family tradition on their daughter and for going against the “tradition.” Sentila however manages a clandestine way to visit the expert women in the hills. The narrator explains:

When Sentila visited the old women, the baby, who was ten months old, would be strapped to her back with a cloth and she would labour up the steep hill to reach their work shed. She would carry some cooked rice in a leaf packet with her on these trips. When her baby brother became hungry, she would chew some of it and, once it was soft, she would feed it to the baby. Then she would sing a lullaby to put him to sleep while she watched the women work intently. (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 60)

The condition of this little Adivasi girl already burdened with a lot of responsibility reminds of a Dalit girl, Maikkanni, in Bama's narrative who is compelled to raise her five siblings and is robbed of her childhood. Imli in the "Shadows" must give up his study to look after his ailing mother at home. In the village, the new nationalist movement attracts him to join the underground army for the Naga cause. But unfortunately, he is murdered cold-bloodedly by his own senior officer. An orphan boy Soaba in "Soaba" does not get a suitable shelter and a school in postcolonial India. He happens to stay with a newly emergent opportunist man called Boss whose house is used for interrogation and is visited by high-ranking army officials. Though Boss' wife Imtila understands Soaba's condition and attempts to protect him but is unable to save him from her husband's atrocities. She is silenced. Finally, Soaba is murdered by the Boss in his drunken stupor. Soaba's life ends "like a bewildered animal" which "had strayed out of his natural habitat into a maze that simply swallowed him up" (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 21). He is erased from history. Shashi and his friend Imlikoba in "An Old Man Remembers" are dragged into the war at sixteen when their school was attacked by the Indian army to exterminate the "enemies." They have never dreamt of joining such forces but for the survival they are forced to join the revolutionary force. There is no choice. These images of the Adivasi children subvert the representation of "happy" "Indian" children by the dominant discourse who are "well-fed" and "well-educated." The postcolonial India is not just unaware of the marginalized Adivasi children's condition in the periphery but is deeply complicit in it.

The "war" on the one hand displaces the Adivasis and dispossesses them from their land and identity, and, on the other hand, provides a fertile ground for the newly

emergent opportunists who thrive acting as pawns of the Indian government lured by position, money, or various kinds of “favours.” In order to suppress the first armed rebellion in the independent India, the government employs various proxies from within the Naga Adivasis to divide and weaken the self-assertion movement. The government forces needed a special strategy to capture the attention of the “disgruntled” Nagas as they could be manipulated against their own people. The state security forces needed “a band of die-hards who would be their ‘extra arms’ beyond the law and civil rights and who would also ‘guide’ their forces who were uninformed not only about the terrain on which they were fighting and dying, but also about a bunch of people so alien to them that for all they knew, they could have come from a different planet” (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 12). The new breed of opportunists became an important medium through which the state got access to the cultural and political ties of the Nagas and attempted to destroy their organization. Boss in “Soaba” is a representation of a new band of opportunists, who joins the “flying squad,” designated by the government for a “civil defense” duty. Boss soon becomes a “dreaded figure in the hierarchy” because of his ruthless counter activities of “interrogation” against the rebels. Boss terrorizes the “suspects” brought to his house for “proper interrogation” with the help of his squad, “some of whom were hardened criminals let loose by the authorities to carry out their despicable designs. Some were deserted from the underground army who had left the hard life of the jungle and [were] lured by easy money and booze” (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 15). Ao’s insight into this side of Naga life gives the reader a different dimension of the “war” in which some of the Nagas themselves have turned against the “Naga cause” and have further diminished the possibility of achieving their dream of autonomy. “The Curfew Man”

presents a similar picture in which a Naga man is trapped into working for the government against the rebels. Satemba, a former constable in the Asam police is appointed by the government forces to work during the curfew hours to gather information about the activities of the rebels' relatives and other sympathizers and report them to the security forces. Leading a shady career as an informer Satemba would "live in the unpredictable area between trust and betrayal and would never knew the difference between friend and foe" (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 35). While Boss chooses to work for the "flying squad" out of his own volition, Satemba is manipulated to work for the security forces and is finally kicked out of the job when his second knee is also wounded. He is thrown out of the job when he becomes "useless" and is killed perhaps to protect the "information" he has collected. The value of the people like Satemba depends on the utility that the postcolonial Indian government can exploit from them. The moment they are incapable of handling the task, they are wiped off. Thus, when the Sub-Divisional Officer knows that Satemba will be unable to carry out the duty, he is dismissed and then killed. By the time his replacement is found, this man with two smashed kneecaps has already "become history." Satemba, Boss and many other such people are strategically used by the Indian security forces to track down and interrogate the rebels while completely ignoring the fact that the movement had a specific political cause and needed a different approach for its resolution. The Indian government uses a similar strategy of luring and if not successful, then forcing the local inhabitants to work for it to get access to the communities and dispossess them from their land and property as the European colonialists did to enslave the African people. Sanjib Baruah reminds us that "India's postcolonial counterinsurgents routinely cite canonical texts of counterinsurgency

warfare, which typically belong to the era of struggle between imperial powers and colonial subjects. They rely on those texts for their strategies and tactics as well” (Baruah 129). These references show that the postcolonial Indian government and its high caste ruling elites were not at all the representatives of the transformation from the old colonial value system to a new postcolonial reformation, but of a continuation of the same discourse in a new nationalist spectacle.

Ao’s literary work stems from her connection to the “small” things that have affected herself and her fellow beings. She writes from her cultural, political, and geographical location without an attempt to “universalize” the specificities of the voices that emerge from these sites that have distinct historical/cultural roots. Achebe reminds the writers to pay attention to the specificities of the experiences and the historical realities of the dispossessed people while writing the literary texts. He denounces the tendency of the writers who attempt to “minimize” their racial, cultural, and geographical location to pass in the dominant literary circle and appeals to them to recognize the “curative power of stories” that facilitates the healing of wounds of injustice and atrocities the dispossessed are subjected to. Ao expects that “the telling will heal wounds in an ageing heart” (*Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags* ix) and by extension, the wounds of the Adivasi Nagas who went through the similar circumstances as the writer in the Naga Hills. The testimonies of trauma and survival Ao recounts in her stories record a significant voice of the subalternized Naga people which we do not find in the dominant literary works. Ao reproduces the stories of resistance and struggles of Naga youths for their autonomy with a critical exploration of the Naga identity politics which falls into the trap of reproducing the same hierarchies and patriarchal domination

of the dominant high caste/class Brahminic culture. Her work takes us through the frustration and the pain of betrayal of the Nagas' aspirations of self-determination by the postcolonial India unpacking various forms of institutionalized violence and impunity engendered by the Indian government through the mobilization of its military and paramilitary forces. Ao's stories not only challenge the ways through which the northeast people are portrayed in the nationalist domain but also demonstrate that the Adivasi Naga cultural/political epistemology comes from different cultural and historical roots that cannot be contained within the hegemonic Hindutva nationalist framework that masquerades as the postcolonial state.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has attempted to contribute to the field of South Asian literature by exposing the gaps created by the failure of the dominant literary discourses to examine caste and its simultaneous presence and denial by South Asian high caste elites. Caste remains one of the major determinants of the cultural/political identities since the advent of the so-called Aryan invasion in South Asia. And by evading its uncompromising territories, permanent divisions, and hereditary hierarchy the dominant discourses not only fail to understand caste as a major component in socio-political life of the people in South Asia but also falsely enclose caste within the overarching ideologies of postcolonial, nationalist, and feminist literary framework, problematically conflating it with the non-caste categories, such as, colonized, classed, and gendered subjects.

Since South Asian literature has been predominantly studied in the western academy within the framework of postcolonial theory, few postcolonial critics have questioned its canon of high caste, mostly Hindu and male writers. Postcolonial feminist critics questioned the paucity of female writers on the curriculum, but they also failed to notice the caste of the women writers they chose to teach and research on. By ignoring caste, they treated the high caste South Asian subject as “the colonized,” and “the subaltern,” thus ignoring this “colonized” high caste subject’s colonization of South Asia’s lowest castes.

While postcolonial theory remains locked within the colonizer/colonized binary, ignoring the existence of the pre-colonial Brahminic caste order, the theory of nationalism fails to go beyond the visibilized urban centers of the nation-states to explore

the invisibilized and marginalized identities marked by the caste system in South Asia. James M. Blaut argues that the traditional theories of nationalism “have diffused outward from Europe to the colonial world as part of the process of ‘modernization’, with colonialism itself being misidentified as a process that brought ‘modernity’, not poverty and underdevelopment” (Blaut 8). The universalized approach of the dominant nationalism overlooks the specificities of the subalterns’ historical, political, and material conditions and undermines their idea of the nation, which differs greatly from the notion of the dominant nationalism. Benedict Anderson’s ground breaking work on nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, according to Ania Loomba, “pays so much attention to those who are included in the nation that it fails to consider those who are excluded, marginalized or co-opted, such as women, lower classes and castes, as well as marginalised races” (Loomba 193). Without positing caste as a significant subject for understanding South Asia, the dominant discourse on nationalism cannot identify and address the majoritarian Hindutva nationalism, which is fiercely contested by Dalit and Adivasi literary and theoretical paradigm as a false, one-dimensional, and exclusionary idea.

Fanon argues that the postcolonial nationalist bourgeoisie becomes a purveyor of the Western colonizers and “only echoed” what the European elite manufactured and “stuffed” in them (Fanon 7). The Hindutvaite leadership in postcolonial India continues to “echo” the colonizers in silencing the subaltern by invoking the caste system as a “unique gift” to India. The Hindutvaite elites have bought into the colonial historians’ prejudice towards Islam in India and want a Hindu nation purged of “outside” religions such as Islam and Christianity. The trouble is that a large number of Indian Muslims and

Christians converted to escape the vise grip of caste. In postcolonial India “only” the upper caste Hindus get to represent the nation; Dalits, Adivasis and other minorities are depicted as the Other and therefore a “threat” to the consolidation of the Hindutva nation. “These minorities are easily stigmatized as antinational or simply ignored and/or excluded by/from the institutional framework of “their” country” (Jaffrelot 455). The dominant narrative grossly misrepresents the nature and scope of caste and disregards the special privilege or the lack thereof because of a certain caste one carries with her/him. Any discourse that deliberately seeks to overlook the reality “that caste exists for everybody living in India, even people who are genuinely convinced caste belongs to the past or is deployed only in remote village or that they live in caste-free surroundings” (Abraham and Misrahi-Barak 3) misrepresents India and its casteist ethos. Because the dominant literary framework stems from the false assumptions of the colonizer/colonized, rich/poor and male/female binaries to read South Asian societies, it fails to comprehend the caste specificities and to acknowledge the centrality of caste in the making of South Asia.

The work of Dalit and Adivasi writers is a major intervention in the dominant hegemonic literary framework. Their texts underscore the emergence of an alternative imagination that locates caste as a major instrument of suppression, marginalization, and dispossession of Dalits, Adivasis and other minorities in South Asia. These alternative imaginaries attempt to unravel the complicity of the dominant writers in silencing the subaltern voice and assert the existence of the marginalized people as equal human beings. Dalit and Adivasi literary imaginary breaks the “cultural dictatorship” (Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*

107), and transgresses the limitations of the mainstream literary aesthetics, which is replete with Hindutva ideology and is anti-human as it is based on ascribed superiority of the upper castes. The oppositional stance of the Dalit and Adivasi literature and literary theory demands a radical departure from the conventional theoretical approaches to as they will only misread and misunderstand the alternative literary imagination. Dalit and Adivasi texts show that there is no possibility to explore the alternative subaltern literary aesthetics from within the dominant theories because of their failure to recognize caste, one of the major antagonists against freedom and equality in South Asia.

Dalit and Adivasi struggles that this dissertation examined through analysing the texts of Bama, Sharankumar Limbale, Hansda Sownendra Shekhar, and Temsula Ao continue to be fought across India and other countries of South Asia. In addition to censorship and suppression of expression, Dalit and Adivasi communities also continue to face systemic discrimination and violence in many parts of India. The victims of India's nuclear power plant in Jadugoda continue to suffer and die "unnoticed" as they are exposed to radioactive material from the uranium mines and violently suppressed when they protest this injustice. Hundreds of thousands of Adivasis in different parts of India are being dispossessed and displaced to "light" the nation and "modernize" it by constructing thermal power plants in the Adivasi lands. These atrocities are barely challenged by the mainstream discourse, including the media. Rather, the struggle for survival and the protest against discrimination are often brutally suppressed and portrayed as "antinational" by the postcolonial Indian state.

The Brahminical order in contemporary India also carefully controls and scrutinizes the access to education for Dalits and Adivasis. This is probably because an

educated subaltern is more likely to be able to interrogate the hegemony of the dominant upper caste/class elites and to visibilize the agency of the suppressed people. The ruling upper caste elites are afraid that educated Dalits, Adivasis and other minorities will challenge the caste hegemony and expose the promises made in the Constitution as empty words. The contemporary upper caste ruling elite seems to be perpetuating a continuation of the classical Sanskrit tradition that forbade access to knowledge for all but upper caste Hindus. In *Caste Discrimination and Exclusion in Indian Universities* (2022), N. Sukumar provides evidence of increasing discrimination against Dalit and Adivasi students in academia, which is largely controlled by the upper caste elites. Sukumar writes:

SC [Scheduled Castes] students in many elite institutions have been forced to kill themselves unable to withstand the hostile environment. As Radhika Vemula said. “I would proudly tell people that my son is doing PhD at Hyderabad University.” Alas, when her son (Rohit Vemula) took his own life after being hounded by the institution, she was not allowed to see her son’s body as he was cremated in haste by the police. Once in the hoary past, Eklavya cut off his thumb as ‘gurudakshina’ to Dronacharya. Even in contemporary times, SC students are excluded and stigmatized based on their caste identity. Their caste is their sole ‘merit.’

(Sukumar 29)

Series of such incidents underline the barriers to the production and dissemination of the alternative imagination that dares to challenge the dominant Hindutva ideology and the Brahminical world order. Neither the upper caste nationalist literary framework nor the dominant literary theories seriously interrogate the unprecedented attack on the creative

imagination that stems from beyond the Hindutva doctrine. The inclusion of a sixteenth-century Sanskrit text, *Ramacharitamanas* in the school and college curriculum by the BJP regime, “with a view to teaching students about India’s ancient culture and heritage,” further highlights the motive of the ruling elites to negate the existence of Dalits and Adivasis in India. However, the Shudra rebellion against the text for its “degrading references to Shudras, equating them with animals,” Kancha Ilaiah argues, “has opened up the Pandora box of Sanskrit and Brahmin textual history and initiated a larger debate about India’s caste cultural civilization” (“Bhagwat’s New Spin on Caste Will Not Stem the Rebellion Against Texts That Insult the Shudras”). The complicity of the Hindutvaites together with the government in suppression and marginalization of the Dalit and Adivasi voice has never been as precarious as in the contemporary India under the Modi government. The antagonized voice coming from the corpus of Dalit and Adivasi literary/political discourse ruptures and deconstructs the hegemony of the dominant Hindutva discourse and claims to establish a more inclusive literary, cultural, and political front in South Asia.

Through my readings of the Dalit and Adivasi texts in this dissertation, I have attempted to document that the battle these texts inscribe is a battle being fought by millions of human beings in South Asia: for the right to live a life of dignity, to not be dispossessed of their lands, to not have to walk in fear for their lives, and to not be forced to abandon their distinct cultural and religious practices. These writers taught me that the dominant postcolonial theory that I imbibed in my literary education in the west was not only irrelevant for the study of Dalit and Adivasi texts but was in fact antagonistic to them as it attributed the status of the subaltern to the high caste, Brahminical colonized

subject, thus invisibilizing the Dalit and Adivasi subalterns. It is for that reason that I have asked for “the end of Postcolonialism,” in the hope of dislodging it from its academic pedestal as a liberatory discourse of solidarity. Dalit and Adivasi literatures demand that we listen to them on their own terms.

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