

**HIERARCHY AND ITS DISCONTENTS
CASTE, POSTCOLONIALITY AND THE NEW HUMANITIES**

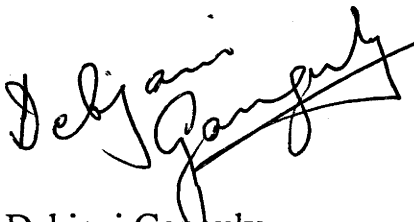
Debjani Ganguly, August 2001.

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of The Australian
National University

DECLARATION

Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work

Signed



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August 2001

Note on Documentation: Most of the documentation in this thesis is in accordance with the MLA Style Manual, 5th edition, by Walter S. Achtert and Joseph Gibaldi. Only the in-text parenthetical documentation, which follows the “author-date-page number” sequence, is in accordance with the 4th edition of the same Manual. Works have been cited in italics in parenthetical documenting within the text only if an author has published more than one work in the same year.

Note on non-English Words: All non-English words and phrases have been italicized in the text, except “Dalit” and “Mahar”. In South Asia they are now part of English language usage. No diacritical marks have been used for Marathi, Hindi or Sanskrit terms.

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ABSTRACT

“Caste is an institution of prodigious strength and it will take a lot of beating before it will die”, so declared India’s eminent social scientist, M.N. Srinivas, in 1962 at the height of India’s playing out of the Nehruvian dream of modernized nation building. Forty years on, caste in India is alive and – well – thriving, and not only because social scientists/policy makers/political activists have not been zealous enough to “kill” it. This thesis is an attempt to read and theorize the enigmatic persistence of caste in the lives of South Asians as they step into the twenty-first century. It undertakes an investigation of the *limits* of sociological and secular historical analyses of the caste system in South Asia and argues for ways of reading life-forms generated by caste on the subcontinent that supplement the systemic accounts of caste in the social sciences. Such ways of reading caste, it suggests, require at the very least a non-pedagogical sensibility, a sensibility that is not bent on marking caste as merely an aberration that modern India needs to be educated out of. What they demand ideally is a stepping back from the analytic mode (an attitude that a project such as this can hardly sustain), an orientation that is in tune with the phenomenology of everyday living.

The first gesture of this dissertation is an archeological one as it delves into the archives of social scientific representations of caste to trace the ways in which such representations have rendered normative a vision of modernity and a template of modernization that cannot but show up caste in a retrogressive light. This investment in a normative modernity marks not only the social sciences but also the process of nation building and the militant activism of the ex-untouchable castes (called dalits in contemporary India) themselves. It informs, in short, all public debate about caste in modern India.

The thesis then turns to non-sociological representations of caste to have a glimpse of the multiform realities of living with caste that the people of South Asia experience, realities that are not at every instance shot through by a compulsion to be “modern”. And yet, they are experiences in which caste is *presenced* and juxtaposed with the time-present of the modern social scientist. When the thesis suggests that the dalits’ personalized worship of the Buddha and Ambedkar in the *bhakti* mode or Ambedkar’s writing of the life of the Buddha in an incantatory, mnemonic and hypnotic register can be seen as instances of making present ways of belonging that social scientists and dalit activists relegate to times past, it is arguing for a *presence* of caste that the normative modernity – the time present – of social scientific thought and political activism cannot accommodate. Again, when it invokes the category “aesthetic” in the final chapter as one, in its sensitivity to the subjective dimension of human experience, better able (than social scientific categories), to grapple with the *agon* of the untouchable protagonists in Ranajit Guha’s or Arundhati Roy’s texts, it attempts to articulate a poetics of caste that social scientific approaches would find ideologically reprehensible. The thesis, thus, in a series of detailed textual analyses of mythographies, affective histories and literary texts written by both upper caste writers and the dalits, invokes ways of reading caste that are sensitive to the myriad ways in which the people *live* with it, to the singularity and the density of dalit life-worlds, to the many non-secular practices that mark South Asia’s everyday engagement with caste.

CHAPTER ONE

MODERNITY AND THE NEW HUMANITIES: **TOWARD A NON-HOLISTIC READING OF CASTE**

But a radicalization is always indebted to the very thing it radicalizes.

Jacques Derrida

Nearly all our originality comes from the stamp that time impresses upon our sensibility.

Baudelaire

And I must tell you bluntly that if you are thinking that you can get rid of caste easily you are seriously mistaken.

M.N. Srinivas

Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, the late nineteenth century Bengali Brahmin intellectual, gave the following explanation to a European friend whose dinner invitation he had just declined:

Dining with you would have been an act of violation of our social code. Could there be a stronger reason? Besides, consider, what else we are left with? We have lost our political freedom, our religion is under your attack, our vernacular literature has not yet reached a level one can be proud of. What else have we got to give us a sense of pride or help maintain our (cultural) individuality? You may call it superstition or a social code, the system of caste and codes of ritual conduct are all that we know now. These I cannot abandon.¹

I am not about to use the above statement either as a springboard from which to execute yet another perilous dive into the sociology of caste or as a pad from which to launch yet another activism-imbued missive on the many demerits of the caste-system – that

ubiquitous, befuddling constellation of social practices that has characterized South Asian society for at least three thousand years now, a constellation whose cornerstone is the belief, “human beings are not equal”. For an explanation of who constitutes a “Brahmin” and why he would refuse to dine with a European friend, there are tomes of sociological and anthropological literature – enough to populate Macaulay’s “single shelf” many times over – to help the reader find her way through not only the many dos and don’ts that constitute the caste-system, but also the ways in which these dos and don’ts have mutated over the long history of caste in the subcontinent.

My purpose in dealing with caste in the thesis is quite something else. It is to see in caste a continuation of a life-form on the subcontinent that one and a half centuries of colonial rule and the forces of global capitalist modernity that such rule brought in its wake have been unable to wipe out. It is to ask questions about the ways in which caste has been represented in European categories of thought since the nineteenth century, representations that are, as we shall see in chapters two, three and four, the staple of current social scientific and secular historical readings of caste in academia. It is to ponder the opacity of such readings that can see in Mukhopadhyay’s statement only a desire to hold on to a custom that is moribund and irrevocably backward on the civilizational scale, but cannot accommodate an interpretation that sees Mukhopadhyay’s appeal to his caste status in the face of the loss of political and cultural sovereignty suffered by Indians at the hands of the British – a loss that he documents briefly in the passage above – as a struggle to keep alive a life-form in ways where the questions of modernity, while not irrelevant, are not central to the ways in which people make sense of their lives. In the context of Mukhopadhyay’s nineteenth century colonial Bengal, it would be relevant to pose Homi Bhabha’s query: “What is modernity in those colonial conditions where its imposition is

itself a denial of historical freedom, civic autonomy and the ‘ethical’ choice of refashioning?” (241). As will be clear from the subsequent pages, the way I read Bhudev Mukhopadhaya’s refusal to dine with his European friend – and I do read it as a struggle to make sense of life in the midst of colonial modernity – is symptomatic of my argument about caste, colonialism and modernity that frames this thesis as a whole

Before the reader jumps to the conclusion that another possible title for my thesis could be “Caste: Rejection of Modernity”, let me state that my attempt to argue for a study of caste as a life-form in South Asia does not have as its flip side a retrogressive assertion of essential cultural difference from the West, as assertion that marks the paranoia of West and modernity baiters. I am not suggesting that in the face of the assault of global modernity that characterizes life in the twenty-first century, we hold on to institutions like caste to maintain our cultural autonomy and leave an intimate engagement with modernity to the “cultural renegades”. Quite the contrary. I am saying that in this age of so-called late modernity when we encounter life-forms such as those generated by caste, when some of us experience living with caste in our everyday lives – at the very least, most South Asian Hindu surnames are a sure giveaway of the caste we originate from – we cannot but ask what kinds of modernities we are living with. We cannot but engage with the many dimensions of our encounter with colonialism and global capitalism. More specifically, we cannot but scrutinize hegemonic knowledge-formations that frame our outlook on the world and that tell most of us in South Asia that the caste-system is “bad” and “retrogressive”. My thesis is a modest attempt to delve into these larger concerns and it is the last one that will be the specific focus of my thesis. Thus, I begin by investigating the modalities of sociological and secular historical analyses of caste and then proceed to mark the *limits* of such analyses.

One such limit was hinted at more than two decades ago by two of the best-known social anthropologists on caste, Ronald Inden and McKim Marriott. In 1977, in a joint paper titled “Towards an Ethnosociology of South Asian Caste Systems”, Inden and Marriott had suggested that the socio-anthropological reading of the *meaning* of caste in academia as an “institution of ranked, hereditary and endogamous occupational groups” (230) was actually “foreign” to the way the meaning of caste was understood in South Asia. There is no word in the Indian language that connotes “caste” in the sense the social anthropologists understand it. The Indian term *jati* roughly stands for genera or species in its most expansive sense. As Inden and Marriott put it, the term is inclusive of elements from both secular and non-secular domains:

The South Asian word *jati*...refers to a great many kinds of things other than those we mean by the word “caste”. It refers to all sorts of categories of things – sets of colours and sounds, for example; it includes living creatures generated from seeds, from moisture, from eggs, and from wombs. *Jati* means a whole range of earthly populations that we call families, kin groups, genders, occupational categories, speakers of the same language, regional populations, religious communities, nations, races; it encompasses the categories of gods in their heavens, demons, etc. (230).

Such a description of *jati* cannot but exceed the secular, sociological category of caste in European thought. Further, even the terms “genus” or “species” are only rough translations of *jati*. Inden and Marriott write that “there is in the South Asian view of generic order no Linnaean assumption of an exclusively differentiating, branching, taxonomic pattern; instead sex genera, language genera, occupational genera and kinship genera may and typically do intersect and interact in complex ways” (230). Drawing on American debates about ethnosociology in the sixties, they go on to suggest that the cognitive categories to study South Asia should be derived from texts that constitute its

own intellectual archive – an attempt that has been dubbed a project in “parochial sociology” by many social anthropologists. Surajit Sinha, for instance, uses the term “Hindu ethnoscience” to describe Inden and Marriott’s efforts (1977, 434). It is not that the two anthropologists are unaware of the charges to which their project is vulnerable and Marriott in fact goes to some length to counter them, as when he suggests:

Indigenous social thought in South Asia is in some abstract qualities an extremely up-to-date kind of sociology with potentially universal value. It is compatible with modern physics and biology. It is very much like communications theory. It shares much with modern linguistics.... It has, like these other sciences, admirable capacities for consistency and comprehensiveness.... (428).

My interest in the Inden and Marriott’s critique of the given cognitive apparatus of the social sciences does not lie in the *alternative* they offer. There are two reasons why I say so. First, their alternative – an indigenous South Asian sociological framework – seems better to them on *scientific* grounds and my thesis, as we shall see, argues precisely against the scientism that inheres in social scientific and anthropological readings of caste. Second – and this is more important to the conceptual thrust of my thesis – my focus on the limits of social scientific analyses of caste is not based on a *rejection* of such analyses and a desire to erect a *better* alternative that will be *more* universally valid and acceptable. It is more a matter of philosophically adopting what Michel Foucault, in his essay “What is Enlightenment?”, has called the “limit attitude” toward it, an attitude that interprets the act of critiquing not as a project that formulates alternative universal categories but that which undertakes “an historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying” (1984, 46). Accordingly, my interest in Inden and Marriott’s exposition lies in their problematization of the issue of the way caste has been represented in modern academic

knowledge formations. Their critique provides me with a site from which to trace the following: the rough ways in which the diversity of the South Asian lifeworld are sought to be translated into sociological categories, the impact of modernization theories on the formulation of such categories and the consequent relegation of caste to the conceptual domain of the pre-modern, and finally the ways in which recent postmodern and postcolonial critiques of European knowledge formations enable one to conceptualize caste in ways that exceed socio-anthropological readings.

Of Caste, Modernization and Normative Modernity

Long regarded as the very antithesis of every norm of social existence connoted by the term modernity, “caste” as institution and practice in South Asia has continued to befuddle social anthropologists, political theorists and historians. As long as social science practice was unproblematically seen as the epistemological counterpart of the process of modern nation-building, social scientists and historians had little problem conceptualizing caste as a relic of India’s pre-modernity, as something that would continue to “bother” and “irritate” and even occasionally “disrupt” the process of India’s coming into nationhood and modernity, but something that would eventually lose its potency as principle and practice of social organization. Louis Dumont summed up this position well when he claimed, “*from a caste society to a nation, the way is long*” (1960, 8, emphasis added). He didn’t need to add that the “way” was linear, unidirectional and unambiguous. There were no doubts in his mind that India’s state leaders and social scientists would choose *the* trajectory that left “caste” firmly behind. Caste was seen as an indisputable signifier of India’s “backwardness”. As Nicholas Dirks put it:

Throughout modern India, public and political discourse about caste is dominated by the perceived illegitimacy of

“traditional” caste hierarchy and by the need to overcome the effects of persisting caste inequality (1997, 20).

Such discourse on caste can be designated as post-Independence and Nehruvian. Among social scientists writing in the fifties and the sixties, it was M.N. Srinivas who best articulated the ins and outs of such discourse. The essays in his celebrated book Caste in Modern India, published in 1962, are marked by an anxiety about the role of caste in the newly emergent nation-state. Two of them, “Castes: Can They Exist in the India of Tomorrow?” and “The Indian Road to Equality” are especially symptomatic of this anxiety. After admitting that, even after independence, the majority of Indians would still prefer to see their identity in terms of caste, he takes upon himself the pedagogical mantle of warning the nation of the dangers of continuing to believe in caste. This is coupled with a warning to policy makers that their task of eradicating caste from the body-politic of the new nation-state can never be complete without a total overhauling of the psyche of the Indian masses:

Nothing effective can be done unless the people themselves are made to realize that caste necessarily means casteism, and that the benefits it offers are bought at a heavy price for the country as a whole. It is not at all an easy task to put across this point to the people, and so far neither the politicians nor the social workers have displayed any awareness of the existence of this difficult problem of communication. The first thing to realize here is that good intentions are not only not enough, but may even produce the exact opposite of what is intended (70-71).

Many social scientists since Srinivas have written about the close alliance between social scientific research and the goals of nation building. At a symposium on changing identities in South Asia in 1977, a young sociologist from Hyderabad said: “I don’t think it is possible to divorce ourselves – if we are interested in finding out what the society is going to be after twenty, fifty, one hundred years, depending on the pace with which you are

going to transform society – from the goals that have been set by the Government of India on that matter” (David, 439). Another sociologist argued at the same Symposium that in developing nations like India sociologists could not but work in close tandem with the statist objectives of modernization and development. He added, “at any rate, fieldwork for the sake of mere discovery is really a sophisticated form of dilettante activity” (Malik, 89). In a paradigm that linked nation-building with modernization, and in which academic knowledge formations had a fundamental investment in a notion of modernity that was deemed universal, practices such as caste could not but be seen as impeding the process of India’s evolution as a modern and modernizing nation.

In recent years, the field of academic humanities and social sciences has itself been in some turmoil, not least due to postmodern and postcolonial theoretical attempts to question and rework the very epistemological premises which the field has taken, and in many respects still continues to take, for granted. Left-liberal universals appear to be in crisis. More specifically, what has been brought to the fore is not only the inability of these universals to encompass every dimension of human experience, but also the constitutive instability of the universals themselves, the fact that, as Derrida has put it, their very condition of possibility/impossibility rests on a radical otherness that is not outside the field these universals attempt to figurate. This then raises the question of an intellectual and, eventually ethical, imperative to be sensitive to and responsible toward not only the hiatus that separates knowledge-formations from the diversity of human experience, but also the “otherness” that is constitutive of the universals themselves. It is such an imperative that is seen to mark the trajectory of what has increasingly begun to be called the field of New Humanities and of which Postcolonial Studies constitutes a very significant strand. Within such a trajectory it has become increasingly hard to sustain the

gesture of normative modernity that inhabits western liberal academia, and that compels one to encapsulate human diversity in terms of the binaries of modern/traditional, rational/superstitious, secular/religious, national/communal and so on. Within such a trajectory, for instance, the confident Dumontian assumption of caste being the “other” of nationhood and modernity would be hard to sustain. Caste, as all of us from South Asia well know, has become an ineradicable part of not only the nation-building process – witness its impact on electoral politics – but also of the life-practices of most of the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent. In other words, it is a vital and vibrant presence in what Homi Bhabha has called the “performative” space of the nation, the “scraps, patches and rags of daily life” that resists incorporation into and is a supplement to the accumulative, teleological pedagogy of the nation state (1994). Caste as *performance*, as *practice*, I go on to argue, operates as a Derridean trace that unsettles the teleological programmatic of the Indian nation-state. It can, in other words, continue to be addressed by the discourse of law, rights and progress, but it cannot be contained within such discourse. Such a reading does not bracket out the question of the ethics of caste practice, unless in the sense of pointing to what Derrida has called the non-ethical opening of ethics, that is in emphasizing the fraught, fractured nature of the discourse of social emancipation itself. Nor does it downplay the victimization of dalits in the name of caste. It simply makes a case for readings of caste that suggest that the discourse of policy, amelioration and progress, in other words the discourses of modernity and modernization, cannot exhaust the multiple, performative sites at which caste intersects with other cultural practices and produces multiform life-worlds and complex and efficacious modes of subjectivity. Such readings cannot but be complex and multivalent. My thesis could be seen as but one small attempt toward opening up this question of reading caste “differently”.

It is not as if no attempt has at all been made in socio-anthropological or historical writing to delve *empirically* into the performative dimension of caste, to analyze its deep and persistent presence in everyday life in South Asia. One can cite any number of post-Dumontian ethnographic works that contest the trajectory of coming into “nationhood” traced by Dumont, a trajectory he said would eventually and inevitably discard caste. Subrata Mitra’s study of caste associations (1994), for instance, empirically demonstrates precisely this continuing presence of caste in modern India. By undertaking a study, not of caste’s “traditional” face, but of its “modern” *associational* face, Mitra argues that, as against the predictions/assumptions of modernization theorists, caste continues to be “performed” with ever more vigour and resilience in post-Independence India. He undertakes an empirical study of three manifestations of political modernity in India – competitive/electoral politics, state policy of positive discrimination and market economy – and shows that each of them, far from “annihilating” caste, have actually enabled the latter to mutate into forms that are conducive to its articulation and practice in modern India. Among the more obvious manifestations of such mutations one can count the emergence of caste-based political parties such as the Republican Party of India (RPI), Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), etc. and the emergence of the new “Harijan elite” (Singh-Sundaram, 1987). Mitra lists a few other specific “modern” mobilizations of caste such as the formation of associations that use caste identity to “promote collective *economic well-being*” (65, emphasis added). Thus, some urban housing societies limit their membership to specific caste-groups.ⁱⁱ These societies go on to form “trusts” that – through plans to establish medical and engineering colleges as also a training centre for Brahmin priests so that the latter can accommodate their traditional occupation to the needs of a market economy – are geared towards promoting the upward mobility of members of such groups, mobility that the members hope to achieve not *in spite of* their caste identity but *because of*

it. Another instance of a sociological work that undertakes a study of the persistence of caste in modern India is Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Rudolph's well-known book, The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India (1967). Arguing against representations that study caste in terms of its ideal type structures and see it as epitomizing "traditional" modes of living, Rudolph and Rudolph set out to trace the potential of caste to adapt to conditions of modernity. Through their detailed study of both the influence of caste on Indian politics and the remarkable reach and tenacity of caste-based associations, they argue for a paradigm in social scientific study that sees modernity and tradition in a continuum rather than as dichotomous, an argument that is implicit in Subrata Mitra's study as well. What they also have in common is the thesis that caste can be *modernized*.

It does not take one long to realize that such studies do not radically contest what has been referred to above as the normative modernity of liberal academia. In other words, while such works *empirically* demonstrate the limitations of the Dumontian position, they continue to be, in the final analysis, conceptually circumscribed by hegemonic articulations of caste as *pre-modern*, *non-secular*, *il-liberal*, *un-democratic*, in short, as containing within it all that marks India's "sluggish" pace towards modernity. Since these readings do not aim at a critique of modernity, of modernization and of historicist ways of reading South Asia, they are unable to initiate/sustain a reading of caste practices that would conceptually be in *excess* of the demands of social justice and modern nation building. It is this "inability" and "excess" that my thesis attempts to address.

The thesis takes as its starting point the new humanist/postcolonial gesture of opening up the normative status of the universals of left-liberal academia to their own *discursivity*, by

which is meant a gesture that brings to the surface both their finitude and their possibilities. In other words, if such universals as nation, class, secularism and democracy, are recast as *discourses*, they can each be seen as “differential ensemble of signifying sequences in which meaning is constantly renegotiated” (Torfing, 85). Such discourses can then be seen to circulate in a field of irreducible surplus produced after they have accomplished what can only be a partial fixation of meaning. It is such a field that would constitute their discursivity. In my reading of caste I draw precisely on this notion of discursivity.

I have a disclaimer to add before I proceed. My attempt to read caste as discourse does not automatically connote a disavowal of the materiality of caste, a disavowal of the way in which its imbrication in South Asian institutional structures affects the lived reality of the people. The pain of the dalit is palpable and embodied. I cannot presume to reduce it to a text or even to a series of texts, or even to discourse pure and simple. Its corporeal presence will forever cast an anguished shadow over anything one writes, or has written, about it. At the same time, it is also a pain that has long, complex and overlapping histories, histories about which there is even today hardly any consensus, notwithstanding the tomes that have been devoted to their analysis. What I am arguing for, I suppose, is what Gayatri Spivak has called the “textuality of the socius” (1990,120), that is, the awareness that the agony and anguish of the victims of caste violence are intimately connected with the ways in which the varied discursive productions of caste circulate in social spaces as “commonsense” and “popular belief”. When her friends, neighbours, teachers and colleagues sneer at the dalit poet Kumud Pawde for doing a university degree in Sanskrit (an experience documented in her autobiography, *Antasphot*) they draw on centuries-old Vedic/Brahmanical discourse that has itself in turn undergone a process of systematic reification under colonial rule.

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I have a disclaimer to add before I proceed. My attempt to read caste as discourse does not automatically connote a disavowal of the materiality of caste, a disavowal of the way in which its imbrication in South Asian institutional structures affects the lived reality of the people. The pain of the dalit is palpable and embodied. I cannot presume to reduce it to a text or even to a series of texts, or even to discourse pure and simple. Its corporeal presence will forever cast an anguished shadow over anything one writes, or has written, about it. At the same time, it is also a pain that has long, complex and overlapping histories, histories about which there is even today hardly any consensus, notwithstanding the tomes that have been devoted to their analysis. What I am arguing for, I suppose, is what Gayatri Spivak has called the “textuality of the socius” (1990,120), that is, the awareness that the agony and anguish of the victims of caste violence are intimately connected with the ways in which the varied discursive productions of caste circulate in social spaces as “commonsense” and “popular belief”. When her friends, neighbours, teachers and colleagues sneer at the dalit poet Kumud Pawde for doing a university degree in Sanskrit (an experience documented in her autobiography, *Antasphot*) they draw on centuries-old Vedic/Brahmanical discourse that has itself in turn undergone a process of systematic reification under colonial rule.

227). One needn't add that such forms of knowledge have had a deep investment in the notion of the West as the repository of order, reason and freedom, and that such notions could only withstand scrutiny under a process of relentless and systematic othering of the rest of the world.

The attempts, both to read caste as *performance*, and to map the multiple discursive formations that allow for diverse readings of caste to emerge, not only rupture the scientific assumptions of western knowledge-systems – caste as irrational, pernicious, anomalous, pre-modern, etc. – but also expose the deep investment of the postcolonial nation-state in such scientism. Much metropolitan post-War historical formulation on the Third World has attempted to posit “nationalism” as the dialectical opposite of imperialism. This has often led to the foregrounding of homogeneous discourses of cultural nationalism over against palpably heterogeneous ways in which postcolonial histories and identities have been imagined and constructed in the ex-colonies of the Third World, ways that serve as reminders of the necessity to analyze the problem of “legitimacy” of the claims of a nation. Aijaz Ahmad, for instance, reminded us that even a rigorous Marxist scholar like Fredric Jameson was not averse to positing all Third World cultural productions as “national allegories” (1993, 95-122). It is this attempt on the part of western historical and social scientific scholarship to construct the Third World in terms of “national” (“caste” or any other) essence that the New Humanities trajectory in postcolonial studies attempts to counter and critique. Within such a trajectory “the nation turns from being the symbol of modernity into becoming the symptom of the *ethnography of the ‘contemporary’* within modern culture” (Bhabha, 147, emphasis added). Analogous to Bhabha’s advocacy of a deconstructive strategy in postcolonial academic approaches to the “nation”, is the subaltern historian Dipesh Chakrabarty’s plea for “provincializing

Europe” within the Humanities so as to effect a reterritorialization of non-western knowledge forms (1992). Chakrabarty’s is not, however, a nativist clarion call to retrieve all that is *essential* and *indigenous* within the non-West and posit them in opposition to the hegemonic West. It is rather an attempt to mark what he calls the “asymmetry of ignorance” that he sees as characterizing Humanities studies in the West. Such studies have not only given us whole theories with which to study mankind in its entirety, but have made explicit choices in order to determine which archives, thoughts and experiences would be *normative*, would constitute “theory” in the first place. Needless to say, the norm has never been non-Europe. Talking of the discipline of history, Chakrabarty says that “western” historians “produce their work in relative ignorance of non-western histories, and this does not seem to affect the quality of their work. This is a gesture, however, that ‘we’ [non-western historians] cannot return. We cannot even afford an equality or symmetry of ignorance at this level without taking the risk of appearing ‘old-fashioned’ or ‘outdated’” (2). What the new historians/new humanists/postcolonial theorists can do to counter this tyranny of normative modernity is to foreground the *traces* or *supplements* that inhabit the theoretical categories of western liberal academia, and that can no longer make it feasible to talk in terms of such indisputable binaries as modern/non-modern, rational/superstitious, secular/religious, national/communal. This displacement/deconstruction of the normative in Humanities – be it the “nation” or “Europe” or “modern” – is effected through several theoretical strategies in the domain of postcolonial studies.

Critique of Modernity in Postcolonial Thought

Having been based in Australia for this project and having been exposed to debates about Reconciliation and Land Rights where the indigenous people of this continent are

concerned, I am tempted to draw my first example of such a strategy from within the archive of Aboriginal Studies. Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs, in their recently published Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation (1998), write of the ways in which the discourse of the Aboriginal “sacred” impinges on the public sphere of a modern nation. The sacred, once comfortably relegated to the domain of the “primitive” by anthropologists, has insinuated its way into key political and cultural debates about the very constitution of the Australian nation and Australian identity itself. Thus, the mining industry and the pastoralists feel alternately threatened and irritated by it and constantly voice the need to “deactivate(d), discourage(d) and restrain(d)” it. The sacred sites in such opinion “block business” (2). Various forms of New Ageisms on the other hand uphold precisely this sacredness as an antidote to the alienating effects of modernity. Environmentalists, among others, belong to this category. But whether the Aboriginal sacred is denigrated or valorized, there is no doubt that its status in current political debates is that of the “dominant” and not of the “residual”, to use Raymond Williams’ terms. As Gelder and Jacobs put it:

Aboriginal sacredness figures much more largely, and insistently, in this country these days. Far from being left behind as a relic or a residue, it may even be able to determine aspects of Australia’s future; far from being out of place in Australia, it sometimes seems (to an increasing number of commentators) to be *all over the place* (1, emphasis original).

How does one reconcile this pervasiveness, even this “excess” of the Aboriginal in the Australian public sphere with the “lack” which has otherwise been its lot in this predominantly white settler nation – lack of social visibility, lack of adequate financial resources, lack of adequate healthcare and other social and political opportunities? Gelder and Jacobs invoke the notion of the “uncanny” to account for this apparent paradox. The

“uncanny” very simply, makes the familiar appear strange and vice versa. Aboriginal sacredness-in-the-midst-of-Australian-modernity becomes an instance of the Freudian notion of the “unhomely”, the “unfamiliar”, the “inaccessible” working through that which is “home”, a familiar and accessible place (23). The sacred becomes activated and dialogic vis-à-vis modernity, or as the authors put it, “sacredness and modernity *solicit* each other” (22, emphasis added). The two are not seen as incommensurable in the Lyotardian sense. Rather, they are involved in a “promiscuous” relationship and they actively play on and are shaped by each other. In the process the “settler” nation feels “unsettled” at the same time – a condition that is designated as the postcolonial uncanny by Gelder and Jacobs. The “uncanny” thus becomes the theoretical handle by means of which the binaries erected by current academic knowledge formations, the binaries of Aboriginal/White, religious/political, sacred/secular, private/public are deconstructed. Such a reading tells us that the controversies surrounding the Aboriginal sacred sites raise questions that can no longer continue to be addressed in the language of left-liberal politics. The “sacred” here is no longer the “other” of modernity but something that actively *solicits* it, something that is as *constitutive* of the domain of Australian cultural politics as the other pillars of modernity such as secularism and rational governance. It is also a category that distinctly “unsettles” the modern Australian nation and radically foregrounds the trace of the “other” that *rational* political imperatives of modern nation-states are inevitably prone to exclude/suppress.

Gelder and Jacobs’ reading of Aboriginal-sacredness-in-the-midst-of-Australian-modernity can be related to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s invocation of the notion of “catachresis” as another postcolonial strategy that unsettles the given-ness and foregrounds the provincialism of some key constructs of western modernity such as “nationhood”,

“sovereignty”, “citizenship” and “secularism”. The term “catachresis” literally connotes an absurd or wrong use of a term. Spivak uses it to designate the peculiar nature of the postcolonial world’s transactions with the constructs mentioned above. As she puts it:

One might...look at the larger third world as diversely postcolonial, making catachrestic claims.... The political claims over which battles are being fought are... nationhood, sovereignty, citizenship, secularism. Those claims are catachrestic claims in the sense that the so-called adequate narratives of the concept-metaphors were supposedly not written in the spaces that have decolonized themselves, but rather in the spaces of the colonizers. (1993, 13)

From such a formulation Spivak does not jump to the conclusion that since constructs such as nationalism *et al.* are western/European constructs, they are unfit as categories from which to negotiate postcolonial spaces and subjectivities. Rather, she sees their imbrication in postcoloniality in terms of a “meaningful and productive misuse” (Mufti 1998, 107) – what she calls “catachresis”. She, in fact, emphasizes two meanings of the term: to wrest a conceptual category from its *proper, assigned* meaning, and to secure it by *other* places, to disturb its claims to an origin, in short (269). Such catachrestic transactions with the constructs of western modernity are seen as enabling to the extent that they foreground the agency of the postcolonial intellectual in *transforming* the narrative space within which these constructs can be re-articulated. Transforming, *not* extending: that is the crux of the transaction that Spivak talks of. Thus, when scholars like Edward Said, Ashis Nandy and Partha Chatterjee debate on secularism and nationalismⁱⁱⁱ from non-European cultural spaces, they do not merely extend the use of these constructs to *accommodate* the non-West; that would connote a systematic erasure of those traces that do not “fit”. Their project is rather to push such traces towards visibility so that the given or assured meanings of the constructs referred to above are themselves in crisis. Let us take a look at a few

instances of such catachrestic transactions with modernity in the area of postcolonial studies.

My first example comes from the work of Ashis Nandy. Nandy may himself be surprised at his inclusion in the pantheon of postcolonial thinkers. Nevertheless, in his psychoanalysis-based engagement with the psyche of the Indian masses, he has been among the first Indian intellectuals in independent India to probe into the pathology of colonialism. His critique of what he calls “official” social science in India has been as relentless as his critique of categories derived from western knowledge forms. In 1990 he wrote:

A significant aspect of post-colonial structures of knowledge in the third world is a peculiar form of imperialism of categories. Under such imperialism a conceptual domain is sometimes hegemonized so effectively by a concept produced and honed in the West that the original domain vanishes from our awareness. Intellect and intelligence become IQ, the oral cultures become cultures of the primitive or the preliterate, the oppressed become the proletariat, social change becomes development (1990, 69).

He is, here, commenting on the power of precisely the normative modernity of left-liberal academia that I spoke of earlier. The polemical style of Nandy’s interventions in the critique of modernity debates in the context of South Asia and his tendency to idealize non-modern ways of living to clinch his arguments have, however, very often led to his being branded variously a “nativist”, a “reactionary”, a “neo-traditionalist” and even a supporter of the chauvinist brand of Hindu nationalism in recent years.^{iv} One remembers the furore among intellectuals and academics that his remarks on the Deorala sati generated a few years back. But a more detailed, nuanced and critical reading of both his remarks on the sati incident and his many deliberations on the validity of secular categories

of thought in analyzing South Asian life-forms, provides us with a glimpse of an intellectual orientation that resonates with some of the key concerns of postcolonial thought.

Let me first briefly present his stance on the category of the secular as it circulates in academia and within the Indian public sphere and then link it to his argument about why it is limiting to read Roop Kanwar's sati purely in left-liberal terms as a horrifying anomaly in a modernizing nation. Nandy's position is that the idea of the secular as a handmaiden to the objectives of the modern nation-state – where it primarily connotes a notion in which religion has no place in the public life of a nation and can only exist as the private belief of individuals – has never really been conceptually appropriate and useful where the role of religion and faith in South Asian societies is concerned. Everyday life in such societies is not marked by a separation of secular and non-secular domains. He notes that the independent Indian nation-state took on board the notion of the secular derived from nineteenth century European thought and – given the multi-religious nature of Indian society – added to it the directive “equal respect for all religions”. But in doing so, it took into consideration only the notion of religion as ideology and not as faith. By religion-as-ideology Nandy means, “religion as a sub-national, national or cross-national identifier of populations contesting for or protecting non-religious, usually political or socio-economic, interests” (1990, 70). By religion-as-faith he means religion as a way of life that is “non-monolithic and operationally plural” (70). Religion-as-faith is part of the phenomenology of daily living. In the context of South Asia, Nandy's contention is that it is the tying up of secularism's suspicion of what it considers as non-modern – religious, superstitious – ways of living with the paraphernalia of modern statecraft that has led to the perpetuation of

colonialism in the guise of modernization, and to the consequent rise of ethnic and religious conflicts in recent years:

The new nation-states...tend to look at religion and ethnicity the way nineteenth century colonial powers looked at distant cultures which came under their domination – at best as ‘things’ to be studied, ‘engineered’, ghettoed, museumized or preserved in reservations; at worst as inferior cultures opposed to the principles of modern living and inconsistent with the game of modern politics, science and development, and therefore deservedly facing extinction (89).

He contends that the principle of secularism as advocated by a “small group of de-ethnicized, middle-class politicians, bureaucrats and intellectuals” (86) cannot begin to address the problem of religious and political conflict in the subcontinent unless it is informed by an intimate engagement with life-forms generated by religion-as-faith in the subcontinent. Modern statecraft cannot encompass within its technocratic and secular presentism the heterotemporality of everyday Hinduism or Islam or Buddhism or Jainism or Sikhism.

It is in the context of his remarks on the viability or otherwise of the category “secular” in reading South Asian lifeworlds that one can begin to read Nandy’s intervention on the Deorala sati incident in non-alarmist terms. The incident refers to the burning of a widow named Roop Kanwar on her husband’s funeral pyre in the state of Rajasthan in mid-1987. Modern India was quick to respond. As Nandy puts it, “The peculiar mix of fascination, fear, theatrics, self-righteousness, and anger with which India’s westernized middle classes reacted to the sati committed by Roop Kanwar...would have delighted a psychologist” (1995, *Sati in Kaliyuga*, 32) The state quickly intervened and arrested the kin of Roop Kanwar who were considered complicit in what was nothing short of “murder” in the eyes of law. Not unnaturally the dominant English press and media in metropolitan India carried

analyses of the incident by public intellectuals, journalists, social scientists and feminist activists who condemned the sati in categorical terms. It was seen as a sign of the sheer backwardness of Rajput culture and the utter degradation of women in such a culture. In the midst of such metropolitan outrage at the primitivism of the Rajasthani Rajputs, Nandy's was a voice with a difference. He did not, of course, as has been widely misconstrued, glorify Roop Kanwar's sati. But he did make an attempt to understand whether a purely "modern" and "progressive" stance vis-à-vis the incident was adequate to read both the incident and the faith of the people who later visited the spot as one would visit a shrine. He also argued for distinguishing between the particular act of committing sati – sati as *ghatana* – and the ways in which the motif of sati has been part of the Hindu collective psyche for centuries now – sati as *pratha*. Sati as *pratha* has featured in some of the most venerated texts belonging to both ancient and modern Indian literary traditions. Let us take a brief look at his arguments.

Nandy begins with the point that the shock experienced by the Indian elite at the sight of such "esoterica that had survived the juggernaut of progress" (32) has to be seen in the light of India's democratic process that has in recent years brought to political visibility much of non-modern India. He goes on to argue that, the more obvious the presence of India's non-elite in the public sphere, the more vehement the claims of the westernized urban elite about their being the bastions of rationality and progress in modern India. He goes on to enumerate many events surrounding the Deorala sati that would appear inevitably retrogressive when approached from a perspective in which modernity is normative, but which could begin to make sense in the context of lives that at best have had a tenuous connection with the evolution of the Indian nation-state as a modern and modernizing entity. I mention just one of them.

Nandy refers to a poll conducted by India's best-known English daily, The Times of India, to find out the level of support for the sati among Indian women. Of the respondents, 63 percent of women and 41.5 percent in the age group 25-40 supported the sati and about 50.8 percent refused to accept it as a crime. The Times captioned its findings under the heading, "Roop Kanwar did the Right Thing". Nandy ponders whether a pedagogic reading of this poll – which would suggest that these women have yet to be educated about their rights in the modern world – can begin to delve into the ways the incident resonated with the life-worlds these women inhabited. As he says:

The ideas represented in the myth of the original sati, as reaffirmed in epics, folk tales, and ballads, continue to live in the heart of millions of Indians. These ideas constitute part of the basic substratum of Indian culture. They cannot be wiped away by angry letters to newspapers (42).

Needless to say, Nandy's argument is not underpinned by any notion of cultural relativism or by the premise that the pedagogical approach is wrong or invalid. He is merely keen to make visible the limits of such an approach. This is what makes him question the validity of a recent act proscribing the glorification of sati:

Does the new law mean that children will not read about or admire queen Padmavati's self-chosen death in medieval times? Does it mean that that part of the Mahabharata which describes Madri's sati will now be censored? What about Rabindranath Tagore's awe-inspiring, respectful depiction of sati and Abanindranath Tagore's brilliant invocation of the courage, idealism and tragedy of sati in medieval Rajasthan? Do we proscribe their works, too, forgetting that the Tagores have been in the forefront of the movement against sati during the colonial period? What about Kabir, who, for over the last four centuries, has remained the ultimate symbol of spirituality and inter-religious tolerance in this country? After all...Kabir constantly uses 'the impulse of sati' as an image of surrendering one's ego to God (38-39).

Nandy's point is that a pedagogical approach to non-modern life-worlds – which is the stance assumed by activists, social scientists and policy makers in quest of social justice – is not open to ways of living where modernity is not normative. This is also what makes him say that modern India is less outraged by dowry murders than by sati because the former is motivated by the ills of capitalist modernity, that is, self-interest, rational cost-calculation and profiteering, while the latter has self-immolation as its moral basis:

The very idea of self-immolation is deeply disturbing in a world where self-interest is the ultimate currency of public life.... Moderns can understand the use of sati for profit, but they nervously remember the 300,000 people who went to Deorala on pilgrimage after Roop's death, with no interest in profit at all. *Their faith was real and not feigned; that faith tells something to modern Indians they do not like to hear* (50-51, emphasis added).

Nandy calls for a critique of secular categories of thought in analyzing India precisely because of the inability of such categories to explain the nature of such *real* faith, except, of course, as an aberration. In what follows, I take up yet another postcolonial reading and reworking of the category “secular”, that of Edward Said. If for Nandy the “secular” in the context of democratic India is a sign of the alienation of modern metropolitan India from its non-modern, non-elite masses, a sign, in other words, that is not woven with the rich and dense texture of everyday living in South Asia, for Said the “secular” is that which helps the intellectual challenge the monolithic assumptions of Arab or Jewish nationalisms.

In a recent article on Edward Said, Aamir Mufti writes of an aspect of Saidian scholarship that has often been overlooked by cultural critics – Said's preoccupation with secularism in the context of minority politics. Mufti sees Said's writings on secularism as an instance of catachresis, for, as he says, Said rethinks “from within the postcolonial present, the narrative of progress that underlies the very notion of secularization” (107). In what terms

does Said exactly transact with secularism? The left-liberal debates on secularism have very broadly focussed on the relation between state and religion. These debates have generated a broad consensus regarding a “minimum” meaning of secularism – absence of state interference in matters of religious law and practice, treating all religions within the nation-state as equal, relegating religion to the domain of the private life of citizens. At the very least, in such a reading the modern nation-state does not appear *opposed* to the ideal of secularism and the narrative of “progress” inscribed in the latter – progress towards a state of Universal Reason, that is. Said, however, posits the secular not in opposition to religion and unreason, but in opposition to the ideology of nationalism. The critique of nationalism is a moral imperative for him as is his assertion of, what Mufti calls, “the ethical possibilities of minority existence in modernity” (107). Said’s preoccupation with secularism is embedded in his life long ethical concern with the state of the minority and the exilic – the Jews in pre-War Europe and the Palestinians in post-War Israel. The dispossessed, the homeless, the excluded: these provide him with the enunciatory positions from which he articulates his notion of the secular. The nation-state, far from being committed to the project of “reasonable governance” is, for Said, the repository of all exclusionary tendencies. Its claims to secularization are chimerical for, as history has shown, it instals the political and cultural allegiances of the majority in its apparatus and normalizes a discourse of belonging and at-homeness that renders invisible its many violations against those who cannot be accommodated in such discourse. His suspicions are directed at what he calls the *filiative* impulse of nation-states, an impulse that is far from caring to those who are on the margins of the *national family*. The secular position is, for Said, *affiliative* to the extent that it reaches out to those liminal cultural spaces and positions from which can be articulated new forms of non-coercive bonding. Such a secular reaching out involves, as he says, “something more than strengthening those

aspects of the culture that require mere affirmation and orthodox compliancy from its members” (1983, 26). To that extent, he endorses Theodor Adorno’s warning about the “immorality” of feeling “at home” in one’s home. Or, “never solidarity before criticism”, as Said himself put it in his Reith lectures in 1993 (24). Said’s notion of the secular, however, does not fetishize the minority/exilic position. Rather, as Aamir Mufti describes it, it “seeks continually to make it perceptible that the experience of being at home can only be produced by rendering some others homeless” (107).

If one now goes back to the argument about catachresis and postcolonial theoretical strategies made above, in what terms does one read Said’s own transactions with the secular? It is clear that the “secular” for Said is not a position opposed to the “religious”, but rather one that brings to visibility the complicity of the postcolonial nation-state in rendering normative the multiple allegiances of its majority, allegiances that almost always include the religious. In thus recasting the narrative of the “secular” in terms of power, ethics and practice (of which the “religious” is an important component) rather than in terms of humanity’s march towards Universal Reason, Said injects into the term a force that unsettles its previous assumptions under the discourses of western modernity. It becomes for the postcolonial new humanist not a term that merely critiques/censures unreasonable/non-European practices, but a term that can circulate precisely as critique of its own enunciatory position in the West.

An analogous transaction is evident in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s articulation of the notion of “subaltern pasts” in his critical preoccupation with the discipline of history. As has been well documented by philosophers and cultural theorists, “history” as a significant disciplinary formation emerged in the nineteenth century, the era of high modernity.^v The

flip side of this era was, of course, the near-global reach of European imperialism. The whole apparatus of history-as-knowledge was, as Michel Certeau and others have pointed out, constructed around Western Europe's contact with the "other". Moreover, as Bernard Cohn put it, "The history which the Europeans constructed for themselves was part of a *growing process of control over space*" (1981, 228, emphasis added). To that extent the discipline was from the beginning imbricated in the discourse of colonialism. The legacy of the Enlightenment enabled imperial Europe to represent itself as the norm, as the most "evolved" form of human society, and colonialism was not surprisingly seen as Europe's attempt to haul the rest of the world from its "stupor" and energize it to march along the trajectory of progress and freedom, with itself as the undisputed leader. "History", in other words, has always been the history of appropriation of "others". It is, as Robert Young puts it in his reading of Helene Cixous, a "mode of knowledge" that is also a "politics of arrogation" (1990, 3). What then are the implications of "doing" history from non-European locations? This is a question that the subaltern historian, Dipesh Chakrabarty, has addressed more than once in his numerous essays on the academic formations that go in the name of postcolonialism.^{vi} In this chapter I take up one of his more recent essays, "Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts", where he formulates the notion of "subaltern pasts" as a trope that brings to crisis the disciplinary imperative of historians to write about the past in terms of "rationally-defensible principles" (1998). I read Chakrabarty's formulation as a catachrestic transaction with "history" in the sense that he not only foregrounds those traces in the historian's archive that develop a "degree of intractability with respect to the very aims of professional history" (475), but also probes into the implications of maintaining that intractability in the face of the academic historian's temptation to render it invisible under the guise of "reasonable" practice. Let me elaborate.

Chakrabarty begins with the proposition that writing “minority” histories (or what, since Hobsbawm and E. P. Thompson, is called “history from below”) *per se* is not a practice that radically challenges the disciplinary contours of history. It, of course, challenges “mainstream” historiographical practice by attempting to include hitherto occluded narratives of the oppressed and the dispossessed. And these minority histories, no doubt, circulate as “oppositional” for a while. But Chakrabarty notes that their oppositional stance becomes redundant once they gain acceptance as “good” histories. Far from challenging the fundamental assumptions of academic history, these small histories extend the reach of the latter to many more avenues of human experience. As for their “radical” potential, Chakrabarty likens them to “yesterday’s revolutionaries become today’s gentlemen”. Their incorporation into the disciplinary domain of history helps “routinize innovation” (475). There is, however, one dimension of the notion of “minority” that Chakrabarty retrieves in his discussion of the radical possibilities of doing “history from below”. That is his conception of subaltern or minority “pasts”, that is those pasts/traces that are not considered significant enough to count as evidence or fact “vis-à-vis dominant understandings of what constitutes fact and evidence (and hence vis-à-vis the underlying principle of rationality itself) in the practices of professional history” (475). Such traces can be found in both minority and mainstream narratives of the pasts, but they are traces that resist being historicized and create a tension in the historian’s practice. Chakrabarty’s contention is that, such tension is rarely addressed by the academic historian. And even when it is, even when a historian achieves a modicum of reflexivity with regard to the etiquettes of his/her profession, the temptation to deal with misfit traces anthropologically (as someone’s belief and not as something that can serve as basis for theorizing) is too strong. As an example of the latter, Chakrabarty cites Ranajit Guha’s account of the agency of the subaltern in his reading of the Santhal rebellion of 1855. He cites the moment in

Guha's essay when Guha attempts to negotiate between his democratic impulse to read the rebellion in terms of the *agency* he desires to impute to the Santhals (an agency denied by mainstream historiographies) and the Santhal leaders' assertion that they rebelled because they had specific instructions from their "God" (thus, displacing their agency onto a supernatural domain). Guha, of course, does not attempt to appropriate the Santhal's "religious" assertion to the narrative of *secular* historiography by reading it as a form of second-order consciousness that is invariably underpinned by the more acceptable, (acceptable to the historian, that is) first-order discourses of class, power, etc. At the same time, as a professional historian, he finds it problematic to "theorize" rebellion from the point of view of the Santhal "supernatural".

I shall not go further into the details of Chakrabarty's argument about Guha except to suggest that here, both Guha, and we as readers, have a glimpse of what Chakrabarty has called "subaltern pasts", pasts that "are like stubborn knots that stand out and break up the otherwise evenly woven surface of the fabric" of history (477). The Santhal's "Thakur" will always interrupt any attempt made by Guha to ascribe agency and subjectivity to the rebels. As Chakrabarty puts it:

Between the insistence of the *Subaltern Studies* historian that the Santhal is the agent or the subject of his own action and the Santhal's insistence that it was to their god Thakur that such sovereignty belonged, remains a hiatus separating two radically different experiences of historicity, a hiatus that cannot be bridged by an exercise that converts, however understandably from the point of view of the historian, the Santhal's statement as evidence for anthropology (477).

It is the recognition of this "hiatus" and the determination to look at the implications of "staying" with it, that underscore Chakrabarty's *cataphrestic* understanding of history as a paradigmatic academic practice of western modernity. By opening up the question of doing

history with archives that do not “fit” in any conventional sense, he shows academic history to be but “one” way of reading the past. He further argues that an attempt to resist anthropologizing “subaltern pasts” – that is, seeing them as belonging to other/inferior spatio-temporal orders – and reading them instead in conjunction with our contemporaneity, reveals to us the heterogeneity of our own “present” and the “irreducible plurality in our own experiences of historicity” (477). The Santhal can work as a “figure throwing light on a possibility for the present” (477). In such a reading the “normative” in history becomes inevitably unsettled.

Academic transactions such as Nandy’s, Said’s and Chakrabarty’s serve as instances of the multiple ways in which postcolonial theoretical interventions can effect strategic transformations in the area of Humanities research. In such projects, the constructs of western modernity are not thrown overboard in a fit of nativist enthusiasm. But their fault-lines are rendered visible as are their multiple occlusions. Such catachrestic readings may in the early stages appear to be inflicted by what Sherry Ortner has called the “classic symptoms of liminality – confusion of categories, expressions of chaos and antistructure” (1984,127). But to the extent that they foreground questions of representation and power in the area of Humanities research, they lead to more efficacious modes within academia of making visible what Homi Bhabha calls the “possessive, coercive ‘right’ of the western noun ‘modernity’” (233). In doing so they, no doubt, transact with other “western” discourses such as psychoanalysis, Marxism, phenomenology and poststructuralism. But that is the inevitable deconstructive position in which the postcolonial intellectual finds himself/herself in. There is no Archimedean point *outside* the discourse of modern European philosophy that is available to the postcolonial intellectual as a site on which to situate his/her critical concerns with the contemporary^{vii}.

Mapping Caste: Traces of Countermodernity

To relate these debates to the concerns of my thesis: how do the catachrestic transactions of the postcolonial new humanists discussed above help me read caste differently? I suggest that my attempt to read caste from the perspective of these transformations is, first of all, to mark the limits of modern and modernizing approaches to caste, approaches that, in their systemic relentlessness, are founded on an evacuation of the diversity of South Asian life-worlds which have an everyday non-conceptual and non-ideological engagement with caste. I do so by attempting to map the discursive terrain within which such approaches to caste circulate, to trace and make visible, in other words, the processes through such approaches have staged certain categories of analysis as universal and have normalized a reading of caste as a life-form that belongs to times past and that can only obstruct the coming of India into modern times. Accordingly, I initiate a reading of caste as a series of articulations at sites of overlapping discursive formations, formations that I designate provisionally as Orientalist, Nationalist, Marxist and Post-Orientalist respectively. These constitute the chapters in the first section of the thesis. Through these formations I trace the trajectory of secular history and social science vis-à-vis caste. It, perhaps, needs to be said that I do not, in these four chapters, attempt to give a detailed history of intellectual practices relating to caste. All I do is signpost hegemonic discursive formations that have enabled the staging of specific articulations of caste. Again, I mark these formations as “theoretical horizons” in the sense the term has been deployed by Laclau and Mouffe, as indicating structures that are not endowed with any deep sense of objectivity, but that are, in the words of Laclau, mere “pragmatic attempts to subsume the real into the frame of symbolic objectivity that will always be overflowed in the end” (1990, 185). One outcome of such a reading of caste would be to endow the term with a plenitude

of signification so that one can begin to move away from concerns about its essence, concerns which are part of the corpus of Orientalist readings of South Asia and that of national-political questions towards which the modernity debate in India tends to gravitate. One can, in other words, by foregrounding the discursivity of caste, begin to counter the violence of those staple categories of western humanist understanding of the non-West, those “modes of thinking which configure the Third World in such irreducible essences as religiosity, underdevelopment, poverty, nationhood, non-Westernness...”(Prakash 1990, 384). To do so, I argue, is first of all to mark its *contingency* as a historical category.

In the second and final section of the thesis “Caste, Life-World, Narrative and the Aesthetic” (comprising three chapters) I carry over the notion of discursivity of caste, but shift the focus from hegemonic articulations that generate conceptual arsenal for academic knowledges, to representations of caste in mythographies, affective histories and literary texts. One of my arguments in the first section of the thesis is that the pedagogical imperatives of both the nation-state and the social sciences lead to a conceptualization of caste within a narrative of progress and reason, and that this in turn leads to an occlusion of its performative dimension, the dimension that marks those recalcitrant traces, those singularities that exceed the circumscription of the sociological and philosophical categories of modern European thought. The chapters in this section, in their non-systemic, world-rich – in the Heideggerian sense – readings of caste, attempt to delve into these traces in order to bring to the fore the enmeshedness of caste and other non-secular practices in the everyday lives of South Asians. Such traces feature in the lexicon of the social scientist as “backward” or “pre-modern” or in the lexicon of the activist and revolutionary as “regressive” – such as Ambedkar’s religious preoccupation in his last years, as we shall see. They feature, in short, as a *lack* that the modern mindset with the aid

of the apparatuses of modernization hopes to try and overcome eventually. In the three final chapters of my thesis the same traces are read as beacons that illuminate for us ways of living with caste that the coercive “rightness” of modernity, to cite Bhabha again, censors from our imagination, or censures us into *not* imagining.

Inhering in such traces is what Foucault has called the attitude of “countermodernity” (1984, *Enlightenment*, 39), which for him connotes a certain specific take on temporality. For he characterizes modernity “in terms of consciousness of the discontinuity of time: a break with tradition, a feeling of novelty, of vertigo in the face of the passing moment” (39). He adds: “Modernity is not a phenomenon of sensitivity to the fleeting present; it is the *will* to ‘heroize’ the present” (40, emphasis added). Countermodernity on this logic would connote, at the very least, no absolute breaks with the past and the traditional. It would make space for questioning the revolutionary fervour that wills the past to be dead, that “heroizes” the present. It would also, as I go on to argue in chapters six and seven, mark the processes by which the pastness of the past is *made present* so that human possibilities for living could begin to be visualized in terms of a braiding together of discrete temporalities that resist a linear, empty, homogeneous ordering of time. Thus, for instance, in the chapter on Ambedkar, I read his attempts to imagine a past and present for the dalits of India in terms of a mythographic register, as an instance of countermodern discourse. To spell out my engagement with Ambedkar’s corpus in more specific terms, in chapter six titled “Fragments of Wilful Memory: Dalit Mythographies” I undertake a reading of Ambedkar’s narratives of the genealogy of the *shudras* and the *ati-shudras* and those of the Buddha and the Buddhist subject. The texts that I examine are his books The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables?, The Buddha and His Dhamma, and a few scattered tracts such as “Shudras and the Counter-Revolution”,

“Ancient India on Exhumation”, “Reformers and their Fate”, “The Decline and Fall of Buddhism”, and “The Triumph of Brahmanism: Regicide or the Birth of Counter-Revolution”. None of these, I should add, would qualify as evidence of “reasonable” academic historiographical practice. I take as my starting point the argument of the dalit scholar, D.R. Nagaraj (1993), that such narratives mark Ambedkar’s fatigue with social science modes of reasoning. I then go on to argue that such narratives make visible the collusion of rationalist epistemology with the process of modern nation-building, a collusion that delimits the ways in which, what Partha Chatterjee has called the “people-nation” can draw on their repertoire of cultural memories to articulate/contest their multiple pastness. I do not, however, read Ambedkar’s recourse to a fabular/parable-like narrative mode to challenge the continuum of secular/Hindu-Aryan history, as a categorical “rejection” of rationalist epistemology. Ambedkar had too much stake in modernity and Enlightenment values to execute such a rejection. I see his transaction with it, rather, in dialogic terms, as an attempt to open rationalist epistemology up, as it were, to its own unstable origins in unreason. Through his attempts to enter into a dialogue with hegemonic histories of the subcontinent even as he disrupts their continuum (through his exhumation of the figure of Buddha), Ambedkar writes into the history of Indian modernity what Dipesh Chakrabarty has called “the ambivalences, contradictions, the use of force, and the tragedies and ironies that attend it” (1992, 21). Ambedkar’s preoccupation with and subsequent conversion to Buddhism, an act that has been read alternatively as “revolutionary” and “reactionary”, along with his last published tract on the life and teachings of the Buddha, The Buddha and His Dhamma, provide me with a site from which to explore, along the lines of Ashis Nandy’s work discussed above, the validity of secular sociological categories in conceptualizing the role of faith and other non-modern practices relating to caste in South Asia.

The chapter on Marathi dalit literature continues to engage with the limits of modernist analyses of caste by undertaking a reading of a few texts of a literary movement that emerged in Maharashtra in the 1960s. The movement was largely inspired by Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in 1956 and was initiated by a few Mahar-Buddhist poets such as Namdeo Dhasal, Raja Dhale and Arjun Dangle. Largely seen as another arm of the militant dalit protest movement epitomized by the Dalit Panthers – a radical political party formed along the revolutionary lines of the Black Panther movement in the United States – this corpus of literary works lends itself in my analysis to an exploration of the following issues: the ways in which the multifarious realities of living with the oppression of caste for the dalits are amenable more to creative representation than to secular, social scientific analyses, and the ways in which the Ambedkarite conversion to Buddhism has lent the dalits a language in which they weave their dreams and desires for a “better” life, but not necessarily with the fervour of the revolutionary that wills the past dead. Underlying my reading of dalit literature is my contention is that while dalit politics deploys the modernist rhetoric of social transformation – identifying dalits as “victims” of Brahminical oppression, calling for a total overhauling of the system that addresses the disabilities generated by the hierarchical structure of Indian society very “inadequately” – dalit creative writing (my archive is drawn from dalit writing in Marathi and hence limited to creative writing that represents dalit life-forms that the urban squalor of Mumbai generates) exceeds this rhetoric and plunges into the vicissitudes and pleasures of daily living on the slums and streets of Mumbai. In the process we as readers have a glimpse of an urban way of life that is peculiarly the dalit's own. At the same time, it is an experience of urban living that is so non-middle class that it distinctly unsettles modernist notions of

Mumbai as vibrant, prosperous and cosmopolitan. It is a face of Mumbai that, in short, calls into question existing notions of a modern/western metropolitan way of life.

In the final chapter, “Chandra, Velutha, Ammu, Death: The Aporia of the Aesthetic”, I continue to explore the diversity and amplitude of non-sociological representations of caste by reading two texts that attempt to plumb the depths of untouchable lifeworlds. They are: “Chandra’s Death” (1987), an essay by the founder of the Subaltern Studies collective, Ranajit Guha and Arundhati Roy’s Booker prize-winning novel, The God of Small Things (1997). It is my contention that any reading of the ways in which Guha and Roy weave the loves and lives of their untouchable protagonists into sensitively crafted narratives – narratives that resonate with the visceral, elemental power of life and death itself – cannot begin to be undertaken in a socio-anthropological mode, a mode that resists treating specific experiences of living with caste in their singular richness and density. As Chakrabarty reminds us, the “specific” as it circulates in secular social scientific discourse “belongs to the structure of a *general* that necessarily occludes our view of the singular” (2000, *Provincializing Europe*, 82, emphasis added). Accordingly, the power and poignancy of these narratives in depicting the agonism of their fleshed-out characters, Chandra, Velutha and Ammu, would, in a sociological reading be reduced to the ideological, as instances – fictional in the case of Roy’s narrative – documenting atrocities committed in the name of caste and gender. The deaths of Chandra and Velutha would feature in the archives of the modernizing state as mere statistics measuring the extent of caste-based atrocities. Their *agon*, as Guha shows us, would be abstracted from such archives.

I suggest that such abstraction and nihilism as inhere in sociological categories of reading caste can be countered if the same narratives are read by drawing on the category of the “aesthetic” as it has been theorized about in European thought from Kant onwards. Among the many formulations of the aesthetic in European philosophy, the one that is relevant to my argument is the one that recurs through the works of thinkers as diverse as Kant, Adorno, Horkheimer and Heidegger, the formulation that the aesthetic is the mode that foregrounds the importance of a non-conceptual, *affective* apprehension of the world, an apprehension that is steeped in the sheer contingency and heterogeneity of everyday living and that brings to the fore the nihilism of the universal categories of scientific thought. In an aesthetic as opposed to a sociological or secular historical reading, human emotions and the many vagaries of human belonging are not bracketed out. An aesthetic thought, to paraphrase Terry Eagleton (1990), is true to the opacity of its object in that it registers its density, its recalcitrance, its singularity. Adorno and Horkheimer have stated in their Dialectic of Enlightenment (1979) that what is known as “Enlightenment” can be traced to a shift from practices of “specific” representation found in myth and magic to “non-specific” modes of representation: from *mythos* to *logos* as they put it. They also go on to argue that the aesthetic occupies a space between the two in that it combines both the force that invokes the quality of a determinate relationship to the world *and* the phenomena that reveal such a relationship to be open to contingency, change and chance. It is this notion of the aesthetic as something that mediates between *mythos*/the singular and *logos*/the general that I invoke in my readings of caste in this chapter. The connection of this notion with the idea of the performative that I invoked earlier on in this chapter cannot but be evident. If the “performative” approach to caste is invested in a reading that is responsible to the heterogeneity and heterotemporality of caste practices, the “aesthetic” captures the enigma of lifeworlds into which such practices are woven through and through. Such enigma

forever eludes the demystified, disembodied, public, rational self of modern social scientific thought. For such thought shies away from the phenomenology of life and death itself.

ⁱ Cited in Tapan Raychaudhuri, Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth Century Bengal (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), 49. Emphasis added.

ⁱⁱ Mitra cites a media report on a Karnataka-based housing trust that ends on this rather humorous (humorous from the point of view of the “secular” intellectual, that is) note: “The allotment of sites would start in October this year, on a first-come-first-serve basis. But they will first have to recite the *Gayatri Mantra* and know their *gotra*. Without that, no site” (66).

ⁱⁱⁱ Postcolonial debates on secularism and nationalism are varied and complex. To say that Said, Nandy and Chatterjee transact catachrestically with the constructs of European modernity is not to deny the *divergences* in their respective transactions. Their positions are by no means similar. While the focus of the former is on challenging the elitism that inheres in all western readings of the secular (an elitism that, according to Nandy, prevents such readings from imagining other lived traditions in which religion works as “faith” and is not immediately recuperable under the discourse of modernizing nation-states), the latter, as Mufti argues, reads the secular as a theoretical (and eventually ethical) vantage point from which to critique nationalism. The secular, for Said, is the ethical stance *par excellence* with which to articulate the “minority” problematic. My intention in this chapter is not to enter into debates on secularism or nationalism, but to foreground a few instances of the catachrestic reworking and reorientation of certain key constructs of western modernity.

^{iv} See, for instance, Radhika Desai’s “Culturalism and the Contemporary Right: Indian Bourgeoisie and Political Hindutva”, Economic and Political Weekly, (34.12, March 20, 1999), 695-712.

^v Or as Ashis Nandy puts it in his own inimitable way: “The conquest of the past through history was still incomplete in the late nineteenth century, as was the conquest of space through railways” (“History’s Forgotten Doubles”, History and Theory, 34, May, 1995, 46).

^{vi} Among his significant essays are “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for ‘Indian’ Pasts”, Representations 37, Winter 1992, “Marx After Marxism: History, Subalternity, Difference”, Meanjin, 52 (3) Spring 1993, “Modernity and Ethnicity in India”, South Asia XVII, Special Issue, 1994, “Radical Histories and the Question of Enlightenment Rationalism: Some Recent Critiques of Subaltern Studies”, Economic and Political Weekly, April 8, 1995 and “Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts”, Economic and Political Weekly, February 28, 1998.

^{vii} Partha Chatterjee makes this point cogently in his response to Charles Taylor’s essay, “Modes of Civil Society” (Public Culture, 3:1 Fall 1990). In his words: “It is in fact the very condition of our intellectual discourse – in the ways in which it is framed through disciplinary practices in the universities and in international academic community – that forces us to speak in the language of European philosophy. A ‘traditional’ intellectual from Ghana or Iran or Thailand may have the option of speaking in a different language, but by doing so he will condemn himself to an irrevocable provincialism. The ‘modern’ intellectuals from these countries do not even have this choice. If we wish to do academic social philosophy, we cannot pretend to occupy an alternative subject-position merely by privileging the concepts of Ghanaian or Iranian or Thai philosophy. Alternative subject-positions, if they are to emerge, must be fought through contestations within the site of European philosophy by pushing the terms of its debate beyond its discursive boundaries” (120). Chatterjee also writes that it is the moment of “Capital” that is the key to transforming the history of Europe into “universal” history: “It is the narrative of capital that can turn the violence of mercantilist trade, war, genocide, conquest and colonialism into a story of universal progress, development, modernization and freedom” (129).

SECTION ONE

CASTE AND THEORETICAL HORIZONS

CHAPTER TWO

THE DARK ROCK OF INDIAN TRADITION **CASTE AND ORIENTALISM**

Without the dark rock of Indian tradition under its feet, European rationality would not have seemed so bright and light.

Ronald Inden

The purchase of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) on the field of postcolonial studies has been so complex and extensive that any argument about the representational violence of colonial discourse cannot but have its trajectory entwined with that of Said's *tour de force*. My intention in this chapter is not, however, to undertake yet another reading of Said's book, but merely to employ some of its key categories to account for the ways in which caste circulates as a cultural marker to designate British colonial representations of Indian society. Thus, my reading of the way "caste" has been configured in orientalist constructions of South Asia, first of all draws on Said's designation of "Orientalism" as an enormous textual grid constructed by the West to regulate the way in which the East or the Orient could be imagined and represented. The imperialism of this category was evident in the way it inevitably primordialized Asia. In India we are familiar with how both Orientalist narratives (constituting the field of Indology) and colonialist historiography "hung the tapestry of 'Indian history' between the two poles of homologous sets of oppositions, despotic/constitutional, medieval/modern, feudal/capitalist" (Chakrabarty 1992, 6). Barring the early romantic idealization of India by Orientalists such as William Jones and Max Mueller, in all other refigurations undergone by the scholarly field of

Orientalism in India, from Hegel and Marx's assignation of India to a "lower" scheme of things, to James Mill's cold utilitarian gaze in his The History of British India (1858), to Louis Dumont's Homo Hierarchicus (1980), the category of caste featured as an essence in which was grounded the fundamental reasons for India's "backward", "static" state. The claim was reinforced in the era of high colonialism by a veritable arsenal of colonial government documentation and other textual and institutional practices that fed into the technologies of colonial rule. The notion of India as an entity in which retrogressive religious practices had overwhelmed its economic and political apparatuses, has been the staple of orientalist discourse.

In the first section of this chapter, titled "Caste and Colonial Discourse", I focus on the colonialist archive and read its foregrounding of caste as a function of its procedures of governmentality. In the second section, titled "Caste and Social Anthropology" I look into the ways in which orientalism continues to inform and influence academic practice in South Asia much after the withdrawal of British colonial rule from the subcontinent. In an influential book, Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament, Carol Breckenridge and Peter Van der Veer have suggested that the predicament of the postcolonial intellectual lies in his/her "growing awareness" of the complicity of academic disciplines in the perpetuation of "patterns of domination" (1993, 1). Thus, in the context of South Asia, decolonization has not led to an epistemic distance from the structures of colonial knowledge-formations. Orientalism as a hegemonic discursive formation continues to define the parameters of social science and humanities disciplines in South Asia. A similar point has been made by David Ludden who argues for orientalism's continued sway over Humanities studies in South Asia in terms of its break with the politics of colonialism and its reinstation as a body of knowledge under the empirical legacy of the Enlightenment

(1993, 250-278). According to Ludden, post-1820, orientalism's complicity in the nitty-gritty of colonial rule was rendered more and more invisible as its premises were "shipped" back to Europe and reformulated on the basis of the postulates of European social philosophy and political theory (264). Thus, when it surfaced in the domain of academic knowledge formations, as political economy, sociology, history or anthropology, it circulated as an epistemological template that continued to inform and organize data from the colonized societies of Asia long after the latter had undergone political decolonization. It is in this sense that Ludden states that "orientalism [is] not the moribund legacy of colonialism that Said makes it out to be" (272). Decolonization and Third World nationalism, far from *countering* orientalist categories of thought and orientalist politics, have ironically forged incestuous bonds with them. Further, as Breckenridge and Van der Veer have argued, the public sphere in post-independence South Asia is so imbued with orientalist categories of thought and expression, that it becomes extremely problematic, if not well nigh impossible, "to evolve a postcolonial language of politics in which the essence of Indian unity was not the master problem" (12). To quote them at some length:

Orientalism without colonialism is a headless theoretical beast, that much the harder to identify and eradicate because it has become internalized in the practices of the postcolonial state, the theories of postcolonial intelligentsia, and the political action of postcolonial mobs....postcolonial orientalism [is] no longer formulated as part of a theory of difference and of domination, but transposed now into the very sinews of public life and group politics.... By casting its master-questions in terms of what made Indians different qua Indians, and also what made differences among Indians so much more pervasive than difference elsewhere (e.g. the spectre of caste), orientalist discourse gave a peculiar essentialist twist to nationalist discourse in India (11).

The two sections that follow address this looming presence of orientalism in South Asian studies. My exposition, needless to say, will be circumscribed by the focus in my thesis on specific discursive takes on caste.

Caste and Colonial Discourse

Colonial constructions of caste are varied and complex. Studies of this archive have been even more prodigious and proliferating, especially in the fields of Indology and social anthropology. This section collates some of the findings of these studies and traces the emergence of caste as a cultural/theoretical peg on which most hegemonic accounts of India were constructed. Accordingly, I look briefly into studies of colonial historiography before turning to accounts of what Rashmi Pant has called “colonial ethnographic practice” (1987, 161), a practice in which the process of accumulating knowledge about the colonized was directly linked to colonial governance. As Cohn (1987), Pant (1987), Dirks (1989), Ludden (1993) and Appadurai (1993) have argued, the administrative empiricism of the British was responsible for conceptualizing caste categories in “new” ways, ways that continue to be hegemonic in much academic practice, and in the domain of popular politics in India.¹ Studies by the above-mentioned anthropologists are not, I argue, imbued with “an uncritical contempt for the British archive”, as has been alleged by the passionate Marxist critic, Aijaz Ahmad (1991, 151). Nor do they assert, as Ahmad alleges, that “caste in Indian society is simply a *fabrication* of the British Census and Population Survey” (150, emphasis added). Rather, in the words of Arjun Appadurai, these studies have shown the ways in which “colonial classifications had the effect of redirecting important indigenous practices in new directions, by putting different weights and values on existing conceptions of group-identity, bodily distinctions and agrarian productivity” (1993, 316). Mapping these colonial recastings has led, as we shall see later, to theoretically challenging notions of what constitutes “tradition” and “modernity” in India today. But let us first glance at some early British histories of India, accounts which were crucial to both Hegel’s and Marx’s formulations of “History”, “Progress” and “Human Civilization”.

In postcolonial studies, very few nineteenth century European philosophers have drawn as much flak as has Hegel for his notorious formulations on the state of Asian and African societies. His assertion that “it is the necessary fate of Asiatic Empires to be subjected to Europeans” (1956, 142-43), his characterization of Indian culture as “a dumb, deedless expansion” (141), as a malformed, pre-rational civil society condemning its inhabitants to the “most degrading spiritual serfdom” (144) - these pronouncements have their origin in colonialist accounts of India that circulated back to the centres of intellectual life in Europe as “facts” about Indian society (Inden 1990, Ludden 1993). These facts fed into discourses on Europe’s theoretical position vis-à-vis its oriental other. Among the oldest hegemonic colonial accounts of India, and one that formed the basis for Hegel’s theorization about the East (Halbfass 1988, 87), can be considered James Mill’s The History of British India (1856). As has been well documented, Mill’s work originated in the context of the squabble between Anglicists and Orientalists in early nineteenth century India regarding the value of introducing English education in India (Inden 1990, 45). While the latter argued for the importance of continuing with the study of Eastern languages (Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian) and classics, the former felt that the path towards Indian modernity lay in western education in English. Mill’s utilitarian beliefs made him an ardent Anglicist and, as Ronald Inden notes, his The History of British India was written with the intention of outvoting the Orientalists, and Sir William Jones in particular:

The victory which Mill and his colleagues gained over the ‘orientalists’ in shaping the policies of the East India Company had the effect (hardly surprising given the convergence of utilitarian thought with commercial and colonial objectives) of securing dominance of the view of Whigs and of the newer, more radical utilitarians and political economists both in government practice and in the fledgeling discipline of Indology (1990, 45)

Mill's was a comprehensive condemnation of the absence of both rationalism and individualism in Indian culture and civilization. He was perhaps the earliest colonial historian to posit "caste" as the reason for India's inability to ever construct an able *state* apparatus, an apparatus that would provide a system of checks and balances to the irrational excesses, the "disorder, caprice, passion, contest, portents, prodigies, violence and deformity" (1858, Vol. I, 267) of the various caste-determined groups. The absence of a world-ordering rationality in Indian civilization made it prone to repeated conquests:

Of all the results of civilization, that of forming a combination of different states, and directing their powers to one common object, seems to be one of the least consistent with the mental habits and attainments of the Hindus. It is the want of this power of combination that has rendered India so easy a conquest to all invaders; and enables us to retain so easily, that dominion over it which we have acquired (1858 Vol. II, 141).

More than three decades ago, the celebrated South Asian anthropologist, Bernard Cohn, wrote about three overlapping discourses on Indian society that had materialized with the consolidation of British rule in India; they were the "orientalist", the "administrative" and the "missionary" (Cohn 1968, 6). All three were, of course, attempts to make sense of a society that was too bewilderingly varied for the British. And at one level they were all oriented towards strengthening and reinforcing the colonial hold of the British on India. We saw, albeit briefly, how the hegemonic histories of James Mill and others were moored in an epistemology that was conducive to the portrayal of an India that had a weak sense of history and that was so enchained to regressive socio-religious practices that it was incapable of generating world-ordering rational institutions like the State. According to Cohn, the discourse of the missionary was no less prompt in attributing the cause of Indian degeneration to the despicable hold of Hinduism on the polity. Thus, Charles Grant could (after meticulously listing the evils of Indian society: caste system, domination of

Brahmans, a legal system embedded in religious doctrines) write in his House of Commons address in 1833:

Upon the whole, then, we cannot avoid recognizing in the people of Hindostan, a race of men lamentably degenerate and base, retaining but a feeble sense of moral obligation, yet obstinate in their regard of what they know to be right, governed by malevolent and licentious passions, strongly exemplifying the effects produced on society by great and general corruption of manners, and sunk in misery by their vices.... (cited in Cohn, 1968, 8).

The proselytizing imperative of the missionaries, in fact, made them keener to embark on empirical research and systematically document the extent of the degeneration of Hindu society. Among the best known works of this kind is William Ward's Account of the Writings, Religion and Manners of the Hindoos, published in four volumes in 1811 and subsequently republished in 1815 and 1820 with modifications (Cohn 1968, 8). This is what Ward had to say about the caste system:

Like all other attempts to cramp the human intellect, and forcibly restrain men within bounds which nature scorns to keep, this system, however specious in theory, has operated like the Chinese national shoe, it has rendered the whole nation crippled. Under the fatal influence of this abominable system, the brahmuns have sunk into ignorance, without abating an atom of their claims to superiority; the kshutriyus became almost extinct before their country fell into the hands of the Musulmans; the voishyus are no where to be found in Bengal; almost all have fallen to the class of Shoodrus, and shoodrus have sunk to the level of their own cattle (cited in Cohn 1968, 9).

While both the early colonialist histories and the accounts of the missionaries saw in the institution of caste the cause of India's backwardness and helped fix it in some sense as the essence of Indian civilization, it was the administrative practices of the British that helped secure caste as a definitive label of identification for the Indian populace. As Nicholas Dirks puts it:

Caste became a specifically Indian colonial form of civil society, the most critical site for the textualization of social identity, but also for the specification of public and private domains, the rights and responsibilities of the colonial state, the legitimating conceits of social freedom and societal control (by which I mean, for example, the political definition of the social dimensions of property, occupation, labour and criminality), and the development of documentation and certification project of the colonial state (1989, 51).

As studies of this phenomenon have shown, the notion of “caste” that circulates in post-independence India, both in the academic domain and the domain of popular politics, draws on the British administrative and epistemological refiguration of this category between the mid-nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Since my thesis is concerned with specific discursive productions of caste, I cannot but read the colonial moment of intervention in such production as especially significant, for it was also the moment of unprecedented formalization and systematization of European knowledge-systems. Henceforth, all data accumulated from the colonies were organized “within a conceptual template that would be progressively theorized within *modern* world history” (Ludden, 259, emphasis added). Caste, in such readings, would be wrenched from its multitudinous relations with other aspects of Indian society and circulate as a metonym for India’s *difference* from Europe.

One of the outcomes of the internalization of the Foucauldian dictum of the imbrication of knowledge in power by postcolonial scholars has been the extensive research undertaken by them into archives of colonial knowledges about the non-West. In the context of South Asia such research has taken the form of showing the ways in which the British textual production of India was a function of both day-to-day administrative needs of the colonial government and the epistemological imperatives of nineteenth century European social

theory. The colonizer's lack of knowledge of native languages meant a heavy dependence on native informants in the early stages of the process of knowledge gathering. Thus, Alexander Dow, an officer of the East India Company and among the early Orientalists, wrote The History of Hindustan (1771) while under the tutelage of a Banaras Brahmin. The predominance of Brahmins as informants, no doubt, led the British to write accounts of ancient India in terms of a "Brahmanic sociology of knowledge" (Dirks 1989, 48). Hence the readings – that persist to this day – of ancient Indian history primarily in terms of a glorious Sanskritic civilization. As Dirks (1989) and Fuller (1977) among others have been at pains to point out, what we commonly know as "traditional" India is an archive that has been worked over by colonial procedures of knowledge-gathering. Soon, however, such dependence on native informants was considered limiting and the British actively set about learning native languages so that they could organize knowledge about India on their own terms and in accordance with purposes that suited them best.

As early as 1788, Sir William Jones suggested to Lord Cornwallis that the British compile their own compendium of "Hindu and Mohammadan Laws" for his own "experience justified [him] in declaring that [he] could not with an easy conscience concur in a decision, merely on the written opinion of the native lawyers, in any case in which they could have the remotest interest in misleading the court" (cited in Ludden, 255). Jones went on to translate the Manava Dharma Shashtras (1798). His reworking of the tracts of the ancient Hindu law-giver, Manu, formed the basis of Mountstuart Elphinstone's account of Hinduism in his The History of India (1842) nearly half a century later.

Nicholas Dirks' study of the Mackenzie manuscripts provides another instance of the complex textual grids through which data about Indian society were collected, organized

and circulated in colonial India (1989). Mackenzie was the first Surveyor General of India and his cartographic and topographic knowledge of southern India helped the British to plan its military assault on Tipu Sultan, a tough native adversary. Over the years Mackenzie amassed a “collection of 3000 stone and copper plate inscriptions, 1568 literary manuscripts, 2070 local tracts, and large portfolios and collections of drawings, plans, images and antiquities” (Dirks 46). Together, they constitute the richest source of early modern anthropological data on southern India. Dirks traces the uses to which this archive was put by later colonial administrator-historians.

Among his many observations at least two bear recounting here, for they both foreground the process of the consolidation of colonial rule through a gradual centralization of both colonial knowledge and administrative practice on the part of the British. It was as if, by mid-nineteenth century, the British had made up their mind to govern India both politically and epistemologically *on their own terms*.ⁱⁱ This has had a deep and lasting effect on the ways in which South Asian societies continue to be studied and governed. Political and epistemological asymmetries inaugurated by the British persist, and have become the very conditions under which we organize knowledge about ourselves. Dirks notes that despite Mackenzie’s immense dependence on native informants for the creation of his archive, the Asiatic Society of Madras did not permit one of Mackenzie’s native associates, Cavelly Venkata Lutchmia, to continue with Mackenzie’s work after the latter’s death. The reason was, the Asiatic Society felt that no Oriental could be up to the task which required a “master head, accustomed to generalization, and capable of estimating the value and drift of inscription and literary evidence”. The “native” could at best serve as “auxiliaries in such a train of research” (cited in Dirks 1989, 48). The irony of such a stance was, as Dirks points out, that Mackenzie was himself hardly the epitome of meticulous scholarship. And

Rev. Taylor who was finally allowed to take charge of the Mackenzie collection was at best “a poor scholar and more accurately...an eccentric antiquarian” (Dirks 48). There is another aspect of Dirks’ study of the Mackenzie manuscripts and their subsequent use and appropriation by other colonial ethnographers that bears mention. He notes that while the collection was replete with histories of places, temples, and genealogies of family chiefs and little kings, there were hardly any specific caste histories. Data on caste, however, began to predominate collections that dated from mid to late nineteenth century, a sure indication of its emerging significance in colonial governmentality. How and why did caste emerge as a site of administrative importance for the British? How did such emergence affect colonial sociology of knowledge? What has been the fallout of the colonial administrative/ethnographic discourse on caste in terms of how it continues to circulate in the academic domain and in the domain of popular politics in India?

These questions have been addressed by not a few historians and social anthropologists dealing with South Asia. For the purposes of my thesis, I draw on the ethnographic research of Fuller, Pant and Appadurai, for they have, in their own respective ways, directly addressed the issue of the *discursivity* of caste (and other categories of group-identity) and the specifics of its “staging” in the colonial theatre of India. That caste was not singled out as a “natural”, “transcendental” category of classification of the Indian populace in pre-British India, and that it featured as a master trope for the categorization of the Indian populace only under the British, these are accepted facts of South Asian history today. Its emergence as a key category of classification, enumeration and control under colonial rule has been traced to two projects of colonial governmentality, one related to land and the other to population: they are, collection of land revenue, and the All-India Census. The first project, related to land revenue and taxation, occupied the British from

about the early years of the nineteenth century to about 1870. Census related activities were given high prominence from 1870 onwards (Appadurai 1993, 327).

As many studies of pre-British India have shown, “land” was the centre of all political and economic activities. Pre-colonial systems of control over *people* (the domain of the political) were intimately connected with systems of control over *produce* from land (the domain of the economic). By the time of the Mughals, the distributive system had evolved into a complex network at both local (i.e. village) and supra-local levels, with caste deeply connected to all aspects of agrarian activities. But there was no concept of private ownership of land. When the British arrived and gradually consolidated their hold, they realized that one of the main ways they could meet the growing expense of governance was through collection of land revenue. But they found the process of collection complicated by the absence of individual ownership of land. They soon devised their own procedures by “finding” owners and “settling” revenue collection with them. The result was the “destruction of the complex hierarchy which had distributed political power at the *supra-local level* amongst a host of persons and bodies, linked together through the distributive economic system” (Fuller 1977, 107, emphasis added). The local, or the village level, with the *caste*-based *jajmani* system of exchange was, however, not affected as much. This local system, which was actually only a part of the total pre-colonial distributive system, soon acquired a semblance of autonomy from the British politico-economic system. This also connoted a “disembedding” or “unyoking” of caste from the system of agrarian distribution (Fuller 112, Appadurai 327). Caste for the British could henceforth operate as a signifier to connote a “traditional” configuration of group identity among the natives. As these studies show, the orientalist representations of pre-British India as a land of self-sufficient village communities sustained by Hinduism and its

dominant social manifestation in the form of caste, *could only be possible once the British had destroyed the supra-level politico-economic distributive networks of pre-colonial India*. The village proved to be a much more manageable/amenable/unthreatening unit of administration, a fact masked by the British in its positing of the “village” as the core politico-economic unit of “traditional” India, and “caste” as its core social category, premises that most social anthropologists have since adapted uncritically to their own ethnographic research (Fuller 112-114).ⁱⁱⁱ

We now turn to the second crucial component of the technologies of colonial governance, the census. As numerous studies have noted, this taxonomic project was the cornerstone of British administrative practice from the late nineteenth century to the third decade of the twentieth. This project resulted in what Appadurai, quoting Hacking, calls “dynamic nominalism”, that is, “the creation of new kinds of self by officially enforced labelling activities” (1993, 326). Under the gaze of the colonial panopticon, categories like caste and religion, underwent a process of reification and were posited as fixed, thing-like entities that could be projected enumeratively on to policy debates in Parliament and give the colonial state a sense of being “in control”. It is in this context that Appadurai notes that the *rhetorical* purpose of census enumeration was as much, if not more, important for the British than its *referential* purpose (320). Further, numbers constituted an important part of the “colonial *imaginaire*”, an important means of marking and disciplining the “exotic”, the “differential” in the native landscape. The categories of “caste” and “religion” provided the colonizers with ready *indigenous* theoretical handles with which they could carry out the process of disciplinary enumeration of the Indian populace *without having to give up* their own epistemological investment in the notion of the “difference” (even “deviancy”) of this populace from the European norm of the “enlightened” man. The impact of such

imbrication of colonial administration in European epistemology has been far reaching where the cognitive status of caste is concerned. Rashmi Pant's study of the impact of colonial ethnographic practice on the emergence of caste as a substantive category of social identity traces the stages of the gradual consolidation of caste in the body of census work undertaken by the British (1987). She notes that in order to consolidate its stature as the locus of census surveys, caste had first to undergo a process of regimented ordering and fixing under the colonial gaze. Pre-colonial caste-groupings were dispersed and fluid. The administrators who embarked on field surveys from the middle of the nineteenth century realized that for the natives there was no fixed term with which they could denote their caste identity. Pant notes the complaint made by Census Commissioner Blunt who "spoke of the difficulty of making caste lists because respondents returned names as varied as titles, surnames, the endogamous group, the occupation followed when asked to name their caste" (151). The surveys soon took care of the "confusion", and in the data studied by Pant, the colonial ordering process took the form of "standardizing" and "hierachizing" caste names "as a series that had an all-India applicability and were stable, as compared to local variations of caste names which were responsive to economic or political changes of status and to organized lobbying" (151). These and other processes of ordering and tabulating data were consolidated by subsequent "administrator ethnographers" such as Ibbetson, Nesfield, and Risley. The emphasis on the occupational dimension of caste by Ibbetson and Nesfield, and Risley's anthropometric interests (that led to a rejuvenation of a Brahman-centred discourse of caste), provided the cognitive thrust to the censuses of 1881, 1891 and 1901 respectively. By 1921, the statement of a Census Superintendent in Punjab, intended as a critique of the reificatory effects of administrative taxonomy, ironically announced the triumph of the colonial panopticon:

Our land records and official documents have added iron bonds to the old rigidity of caste.... [the] Government's passion for labels and pigeon-holes has led to a crystallization of the caste system, which except among the aristocratic castes was really very fluid under indigenous rule (cited in Pant, 154-5).

Historians of colonial India have noted the gradual erosion of the importance of caste in census surveys subsequent to 1931. War time budget constraints coupled with an increasing focus on economic data entailed a move away from ethnographic concerns in the next decennial census. However, doubts about the excessive focus given to caste in administrative enumeration had begun to be voiced within the ranks British administrators much before World War I.

As early as 1901, R.E. Enthoven, who had supervised the census of the Bombay Presidency, voiced his concerns regarding the administrative viability of continuing to pay too much attention to caste enumeration in the census. His primary concern was the intractability or "vagueness" of this social category and the futility of investing vast administrative resources to "tame" it, so to speak. He went to the extent of suggesting that the British obsession with caste should be "abandoned", or at the very least, caste should be reckoned with only every twenty years (Conlon 1981, 108). Such concerns were, however, only given an ear when the post-War economic crunch (followed by the Great Depression) compelled an administrative move to matters economic. For the 1921 Census, the British took seriously the criticism of the Indian Industrial Commission (1916-18) that the previous census records had very inadequate *economic* data, and accordingly foregrounded the commercial activities of native population as against records of the ethnographic composition of the colonized (Conlon, 111). But, as Schwastzberg noted in his study of what he called census "errors" (1981), caste continued to trope itself into

records that were avowedly “economic” or “occupational”. In his fieldwork in Telangana on the basis of 1951 and 1961 Censuses, he discovered that occupational data in them scrambled traditional caste occupations with the occupations that people of the region were actually engaged in as primary sources of livelihood (42). Caste, and more generally, ethnographic concerns, in other words, crept into the census much after official policy of the empire and the post-independence nation-state rendered their inclusion as optional or at least not central. The only conscious use made of caste in decennial census after independence has been towards the enumeration of dalits (or ex-untouchables) as Scheduled Castes who could then officially claim the benefits of state affirmative action.^{iv} The modernizing thrust of the new nation-state led the latter to downplay the significance of caste to Indian polity in the hope that the “new” forces of industrialization, regulated capitalist development and the apparatus of liberal democracy would lead to its attrition.

However, as we discussed in the introductory chapter, caste continues to defy the nationalist/statist pedagogy. It continues to “perform” in myriad ways; through such performance, caste (to invoke Bhabha only partially) articulates the “enunciatory disorder” (126) of the *national* present; it “marks the aporia in the inscription” (129) of *nationhood*. This disorder, this aporia^v was nowhere more marked than at the site and moment of the eruption of the upper-caste backlash against the Mandal Commission Report in 1990. It was a moment that brought to visibility forms of cultural signification that were in “excess” of a nationalist pedagogy, and yet that which were inextricably linked to forms of modern governmentality. Let me elaborate.

The Government’s endorsement of the Mandal Commission Report was among the last in the series of attempts made by the independent nation-state of India to “redress” what it

saw as caste-created imbalances among the polity. The Commission's support to the long pastoral arm of the State reaching out to *yet larger* sections of disadvantaged castes was, however, more than what the upper castes could countenance. Ironically, it was the *elite* castes that saw the government making a travesty of its policy of "equal opportunity for all". They saw in the government's imminent acceptance of the Commission Report an installation of a new form of hierarchy, a hierarchy that would greatly reduce the opportunities available to *them* to partake of the benefits of modernity in public life. In this event lies a tale of the ambivalences inherent in the categorical, spelt-out imperatives of a nationalist pedagogy. In the context of India, such pedagogy far from "eradicating" or even "containing" the symptoms of caste-based hierarchy, had actually enabled their proliferation in new guises in the public sphere. To that extent any attempt made by it to resort to a moral high ground from which to counter and contain the "angry backlash" of the upper castes was bound to ring hollow. At the same time, the violence that ensued in the wake of the Mandal phenomenon had nothing atavistic or pre-modern about it. It could be seen rather as an outcome of the procedures of modern governmentality, procedures that are relentless in their construction of what Chakrabarty calls "competitive and official" categories of ethnicity (1994, 155). In earlier sections of this chapter we saw that the technologies of colonial administration taxonomized their way through the native population and constructed, in the process, ethnographic labels – primarily those of caste and religion – that circulated as more or less fixed denominators of identity for the governed masses. The state apparatus of the independent Indian nation took on board not only the colonial linkage of enumeration/measurement with governmentality but also the "liberal structure of competitive pluralism" (Chakrabarty 1994, 152), a structure it hoped would "contain" the ethnological differences of the competing groups. Chakrabarty argues that such "modern" bureaucratic reconstituting of the meanings of community and

ethnicity gave the people a new language with which to negotiate the politics of difference in their participation in the Indian public sphere. It is a language that is perfectly compatible with liberal political philosophy. This language conveys, according to Chakrabarty, the following three “messages” to the people:

- That communities could be enumerated and in numbers lay one’s political clout
- That the social and economic progress of a community was a measurable entity, measured in the case of Indian census by their share in public life (education, professions, employment, etc) and
- That this enabled governments and communities to devise objective tests for the relative “backwardness” or otherwise of a community (150).

The attempt to regulate community difference in a society as varied as India on the basis of a competitive pluralism has, however, backfired on the Indian State more than once. For the State has time and again failed to take into account the dimension of “affect” or passion that constitutes an ineluctable part of any community’s attempt to determine *how much* of a share in a nation’s public life it can claim as its own. Feelings of gratification or grievance inevitably accompany any community’s attempt to “measure” its “progress” in terms of what it can “get” from the modern nation-state. The Mandal agitation – as the expression of upper-caste grievance at being deprived of what they saw as more than their share of participation in public life – can, thus, be read as the logical outcome of the procedures of modern governmentality. For the Indian State it was “competitive pluralism” come home to roost in a monstrous form – self-immolated bodies of students, thousands of others injured, destruction of state property in the form of ravaged university and college buildings, etc.

The Mandal phenomenon has given a new fillip to the narrative of caste and the Indian State has attempted to address its recalcitrance and resilience by ironically proposing a reintroduction of “caste” as a category in the Census of 2001. This proposal has, not surprisingly, engendered vigorous rounds of debate in the Indian public sphere^{vi}. The ambivalence about caste that informs the discourse of Indian nationalism will be discussed in much greater detail in the following chapter. I shall now move on from the narrative of caste in colonial ethnography to its multiple readings in the field of South Asian social anthropology.

Caste and Social Anthropology

In Orientalism Edward Said wrote that, post-1945, the parameters of oriental scholarship were modified somewhat to take into account the massive geopolitical transformations wrought by the War. The “denial of coevalness” (Fabian 1983, 31) that characterized Indological discourse in pre-independence India gave way to a focus on India that was now formally independent of British rule and whose history could no longer be interpreted in terms of the “epistemic absolutism of positivism” (Inden 1986, 444).

The nineteen-fifties and sixties saw the institutionalization of Area Studies Programmes in Europe and North America. The most celebrated post-War formulation on caste came from a Parisian area specialist, Louis Dumont. In an attempt to redress the imbalance that characterised pre-War Indological discourse, Dumont, in his book, Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications, claimed that much misunderstanding and denigration of Indian society and history arose from attempts by Indologists to account for what was inherently a hierarchical social structure in terms of an episteme structured on, what he called, “Homo Aequalis”. As he says in his introduction:

If, like many contemporary sociologists, we are content with a label borrowed from our own societies, if we confined ourselves to considering the cast (sic) system as an extreme form of “*social stratification*”, we could indeed record some interesting observations, but we could by definition have excluded all possibility of enriching our fundamental conceptions: the circuit which we have to travel, from ourselves to caste and back again from caste to ourselves, would be closed immediately because we would never have left the starting point (3, emphasis original)

Dumont’s was the first attempt to construct an Indian ethnosociology in post-War western anthropological discourse. The belief that only Indian conceptual apparatuses could help one account for Indian social practices has had many adherents since. Inherent in such culturology was both an epistemological and cultural critique of the way the Western Enlightenment episteme reinforced politico-historical power play in the era of high colonialism.

Yet, how genuinely transformative were such post-War studies of non-Europe? Not radically, as the brief account below of Dumont’s work illustrates. Dumont’s theorization of caste took place within an idealist paradigm of history. Thus, caste was India’s essence. It originated in a transcendental realm of religious ideas and subsumed under it the materialities of economic and political power. Dumont posited the binary purity/impurity as the core principle of caste hierarchy. From within this binary evolved the notion of “status”:

Superiority and superior purity are identical: it is in this sense that, ideologically, distinction of purity is the foundation of status (56).

The deduction that followed from this formulation was that the caste system was a hierarchical disjunction between status and power. Dumont argued that though there were

two forms of authority within the domain of caste – that of the “spiritual” authority of the Brahmins (or the priestly caste), and of the “secular” authority of the *Kshatriya* (or kings and other politically dominant castes) – the secular or temporal authority of the king was subsumed under and subordinated to the spiritual authority of the Brahmins. Thus, “purity” encompassed “power”.

This was as comprehensive a reiteration of the societalism of pre-war Hegelian Indological discourse as any could be. Dumont projected himself as an heir to the *avant-garde* Parisian ethnography of the nineteen-twenties, in which the “Other” was seen to have “corroded the reality of Self” (Prakash 1990, 393). But he only ended up reinforcing the inviolable divide between the Western “self” and the Oriental “other” in his theorization of caste in India. One cannot forget that Dumont’s account of caste hierarchy in India was part of a much wider concern in European social philosophy about the constitution of “traditional” and “modern” societies in general. The underlying premise of Dumont’s work was the incommensurability of the two forms and a stress on the obligation of the cultural anthropologist to make possible the intellectual transition from one ideology to the other. The caste system begins to “make sense” to him when he realizes that it is the essence of a “traditional” society that is “holistic” and not “individualistic” (like “modern” society). Thus, “the principle of hierarchy is the *attribution* of a rank to each element in relation to the whole” (91, emphasis original). It is “hierarchy” that preserves the “whole” and is valued as such by “traditional” societies. Yet, this same hierarchy is perceived by the individualistically oriented “modern” (by which, of course, Dumont means European) society as unequal, exploitative and discriminatory.

Not all Dumont's proclamations that the "Other" can be understood only if the "Self" takes a leap away from its own domain of values can obscure the fact that his work is part of the anthropological corpus that materialised in "a context marked by what may be called 'developmentalism'" (Prakash 1990, 393). The traditional/modern binary deployed by Dumont and other post-War cultural anthropologists was part of a social scientific discourse that had very high stakes in a transition narrative of human society. India's post-1947 modernization dream and the faith of her political establishment in the transformative potential of science and technology were paralleled by anthropological fieldwork and studies that "pushe(d) forward this formulation of modernizing projects by providing a social-scientific knowledge of *traditional* structures and beliefs targeted for modernization" (Prakash 1990, 393, emphasis original).

In such a scramble for the study of "traditional" societies, non-Western civilizations were stripped of their complexities and accounted for in terms of what the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has called "gate-keeping concepts" where "a few simple theoretical handles become metonyms and surrogates for the civilization or society as a whole" (Appadurai 1986, *Theory in Anthropology*, 357). Thus, "caste" for Dumont functioned as a "gate-keeping" concept, the single essence in terms of which the vast subcontinental society of India was categorised as "traditional". Such essentialization, apart from being vulnerable to Orientalist recuperation, could hardly stand up to incisive historical analysis.^{vii} No wonder Arjun Appadurai referred to India as "a stellar example of the anthropological black hole, where a variety of ideas, findings and possibilities vanish from the metropolitan gaze" (1986, 360). A shift towards "interpretive" cultural anthropology in the late seventies (with the shift away from objective, quantifiable structural analysis) where the historical, the subjective and the experiential aspects of society began to be foregrounded, made works of

anthropologists like Dumont appear as “swan songs for an older way of thinking” (Appadurai 1986, *Is Homo Hierarchicus*, 745).

Critiques of the Dumontian position on caste have proliferated for over two decades now. They have ranged from attempts to reverse the status-power Dumontian binary by asserting the predominance of kingship over caste hierarchy (hence of the dynamism of the political) in precolonial India (Quigley 1993), to an advocacy of a multi-dimensional transactional model (where the Brahman is not the norm or does not have the sole prerogative of determining the terms of caste interaction and transaction) for reading the complexity of caste relations (Marriott 1968), to attempts to read caste as but one among many axes around which power operates in South Asia. Among the last, one could count the work of feminist historians and social anthropologists such as Suvira Jaiswal (1997) who has argued for the importance of foregrounding the linkages between “the evolution of the caste system” and the “stabilization of patriarchy and gender exploitation” (Jaiswal 10), linkages that are well nigh impossible to establish under the Dumontian scheme.

While it is tempting to go into the details of the above-mentioned critiques, the framework of this chapter prompts me to focus on the point that Dumont’s specific take on caste has been enabled by an epistemological template that, since Said, has been designated as Orientalism. I am aware that in doing so I am laying myself open to the charge of being unable to “resist the temptation of popular acclaim” or of going by “fashions alone”. When the renowned Indian social anthropologist, Andre Beteille, in his obituary on Louis Dumont, stated that Dumont’s “work on India [would] stand as a monument *against the bogey of orientalism created and publicised by scholars* who [were] unable to resist the temptations of popular acclaim”(1999, 15, emphasis added), he was speaking not for

himself alone but for a whole community of left-liberal scholars in South Asia who have been deeply resistant to what they see as the “invasion” of *avant-garde* continental theory – of poststructuralism, and of its Third World avatar, postcolonialism – on the domain of socio-anthropological and historical studies in South Asia. In recent years we have seen such resistance manifested in the Marxist historian Sumit Sarkar’s critique of Subaltern Studies^{viii}. Sarkar’s charge that Subaltern Studies traffics too much in “theory” and that this prevents the project from really “getting on” with the task of writing “proper” social history, is in many ways analogous to Beteille’s grouse that an invocation of orientalism somehow muddies the social anthropologist’s “true” response to Dumont’s *oeuvre*. The claim underlying Beteille’s polemic is that a mere invocation of “orientalism” does not detract from the worth of Dumont’s contribution to Indian social anthropology. True, if one is disinclined to trouble oneself with questions of power in the construction of academic knowledge systems and is content with the notion that knowledge circulates in a rarefied domain uncontaminated by questions of power and politics. It is as if, once we shooed away “orientalism” as one would a recalcitrant fly, we could regain our intellectual stasis and begin to resume our conversation about the “merit” of Dumont’s work. In Beteille’s critique there is no space for a more specific articulation of the “worth” of Dumont’s work precisely in terms of its imbrication in hegemonic discourses. To invoke the Foucauldian “bogey” now, power enables, it is efficacious. It is, thus, not implausible to see the “monumental” impact of Dumont’s work in direct proportion to its articulation within a “phrase-regime” that was hegemonic in the postwar years, a regime constituted by development and modernization theories^{ix}.

In the paragraphs that follow I engage briefly with the works of precisely those scholars who have invoked the “bogey of orientalism” in their accounts of caste, and, more

specifically, in their critiques of Dumont. They are Ronald Inden (1990), Nicholas Dirks (1987) and Arjun Appadurai (1986). I then go on to examine the argument made recently by the anthropologist, Timothy Fitzgerald (1996), that Ambedkarite thought is startlingly analogous in several respects to the Dumontian analysis of caste, and that the gesture of a perfunctory dismissal of Dumont's work as "Orientalist" is available only to those who are willing to risk the folly of discounting Ambedkar's thought on similar grounds. I see Fitzgerald's essay as providing me an opportunity to examine the complexities of discourse analysis and to suggest that the homology between Ambedkar and Dumont posited by him does not necessarily lead one to conclude that Ambedkar's analysis of caste was also "Orientalist" in the derogatory sense of the term.

Inden, Appadurai and Dirks have all noted the evacuation of history and agency in Dumont's attempts to delineate the essence of Indian society. To the extent that Dumont held that the separation of religion and politics and the subsumption of the latter under the former was an essential feature of Indian society, he replicated the colonial sleight of hand that rendered invisible the role of the British in disembedding caste from its multiple connections with pre-colonial political and economic systems. In an earlier section of this chapter we saw how the colonial administrative procedures related to collection of land revenue were responsible for the destruction of political structures at supra-local levels. The evidence of such destruction suited colonial political theory which was, as Dirks notes, "part of a generalized attempt to discredit all forms of political authority as they existed under an old regime in which the British had no place" (1988, 205). The subsequent foregrounding of caste as the essence of Indian societal organization enabled the circulation of the concomitant premise that State in India was "epiphenomenal" (3) and that religion encompassed the social, the political and the economic.

Thus, Dirks argues that orientalist constructions of India's essence as devoid of the political, and the anthropological positing of caste as foundational to Indian societal formations (Dumont's position, for instance), "have conspired to deny Indians their history and their historicity simultaneously; their failure to have history was all their fault...the potential subjectivity of Indian subjects was not suppressed outright but shifted to the cultural logic of reproduction implied by terms such as *custom* and *tradition*, which in India meant 'caste'" (1992, 76, emphasis original)^x. Inden makes a similar point when he argues that in orientalist constructions of India the agency of the natives is displaced onto essences that are seen as timeless, ineluctable components of the society as such. Further such essences are invariably interpreted in terms of "lack", as things that have hindered the coming-into-history of the Indian civilization (1990, 5). Appadurai, in his critique of Dumont, emphasizes not only the importance of history as an antidote to anthropology's predilection for resorting to "gate-keeping concepts" in studying complex civilizations, but also the significance of those ethnographic projects that attempt to bring to visibility the fact that anthropologists such as Dumont traffic in "*fiction[s]* of the 'whole'" (1986, *Is Homo Hierarchicus*, 759, emphasis added). Critiques of holism have been part of much theoretical work in anthropology for a while now. Appadurai argues that "the methodological fetish of holism" among social anthropologists is largely a strategy that attempts to keep at bay anxieties about "infirmities of practice", among which he lists:

...the limits of human observation and scientific objectivism; the hazards of the non-representativeness of our small objects of study; the fiction of units of analysis that are isolable from one another; the myth of complete and uniform culture-sharing within communities;...the illusion of the transparency of ethnography;...the increasingly fragile claim to completeness of fieldwork experience, of the act of ethnographic description that follows it and the theories that follow these (759)

He then goes on to give an inventory of recent ethnographic work on South Asia that, in displacing caste from its foundational status in anthropological studies, challenge what he calls the “tropological hegemony of hierarchy” in the domain of South Asian social anthropology (757).

At the time that Appadurai wrote his piece, Nicholas Dirks’s work on a “little kingdom” in South India had yet to be published. Dirks’s ethnohistory, The Hollow Crown (1988), is a fine instance of post-Orientalist anthropological practice. In it Dirks not only displays a critical reflexivity about his methodology and the terminology he deploys^{xi}, he also projects his study of caste and power onto a thick ethnohistorical matrix by engaging with the “inherited legacies of political history, caste and kinship studies, textual hermeneutics and colonial historiography” (11). In his study of Pudukottai, a “little kingdom” in Tamil Nadu, he delves into late medieval and early colonial archives to argue not only for the political importance of the “crown” in pre-colonial (south) India, but also for the fact that “caste structure, ritual form and political process were all dependent on relations of power” and that “these relations were constituted in and through history....” (5). Dirks says that Pudukottai was a “special” kingdom for it was never under the direct control of either the Islamic rulers or the British. Thus, caste in this region was never wholly unyoked from politico-economic networks of power and distribution. Pudukkottai was ruled by *Kallar* kings for almost three centuries right down to India’s independence. We learn from Dirks that in other parts of Tamil Nadu the Kallars constituted an anti-social caste group in the sense that they were seen as “highway robbers” (5). But the fact that in Pudukkottai the king belonged to this caste enabled Dirks to argue that since “caste was embedded in a political context of kingship...the prevalent ideology had not to do, at least primarily, with

purity and pollution [as Dumont argued], but rather with royal authority and honour, and associated notions of power, dominance and order” (7). It was only the gradual British dismantling of the old regime through changes in the political economy and the emergence of Brahmans as native informants for colonial administrators, that enabled caste to float as a signifier of an autonomous social order, an order that reinstalled the Brahmin at the top of the hierarchy. In the case of Pudukkottai, Dirks foregrounds the event of an agrarian rebellion against the king in the mid-nineteenth century – a rebellion no doubt fuelled by the impact of colonial land settlement practices – that provided the British with an opportunity to dismantle existing political structures and consolidate their hold on Pudukkottai:

The finances of the state were temporarily put under the Political Agent’s control shortly after the outbreak of the rebellion. Once the rebellion was quelled the British took upon themselves the right to control the selection of Sirkele or Diwan and to maintain direct correspondence with him about the affairs of the state (323).

By the late nineteenth century, where Pudukkottai was concerned, much of the King’s executive powers were transferred to the Diwan who was answerable to the British Political Agent (333). And yet, as Dirks argued, even as the British were consolidating their hold on the political economy of India, they “were reluctant to permit the full and uncontrolled operation of a free market in land” (333). It was, thus, in the British interest to keep the status quo where social and political relations were concerned. Accordingly they “preferr[ed] to keep ‘agriculturalists’ of the right castes on the land, agricultural labourers in their dependent positions, merchants in their markets, and Rajas and nobles in their ceremonial processions” (333). There was thus a *semblance* of continuity in social and political relations even as these relations were being emptied of whatever dynamism they possessed under the old regime. A process of bureaucratic rationalization gradually eroded

the agency of those who wielded power under the relational political system of the old regime. Thus:

The Raja was separated from the state, state dignitaries found themselves temporary occupants of newly created offices, the honours constitutive of office and person became detached from their infrastructural base, inam land was classified and introduced into an independent proprietary market, kinship was redefined as an autonomous domain, service was linked to a classification system designed to justify and facilitate the resumption of alienated land, and temples were put under centralized bureaucratic management (354).

The domain of the pre-colonial political was, in other words, gradually rendered impotent as the colonial administrative machinery consolidated its hold on India, and as Dirks argues, the crown became “hollow” only due to the colonial tendency to discredit all indigenous political structures that did not serve British interests. Dirks, thus, joins Chris Fuller in arguing that the orientalist representation of India as a society in which the political was overwhelmed by timeless and moribund socio-religious structures – a representation on which Dumont based his study of caste – could actually hold water only after the British had evacuated all pre-colonial political structures of their agency. The colonialists had to draw up a scenario that showed an India which desperately needed *modern* political governance.

I now turn to another recent reading of Dumont, that of Timothy Fitzgerald who argues that since much of Ambedkar’s analysis of caste and of its importance in Indian society is similar to that of Dumont, it is inherently problematic to brand Dumont’s work as orientalist. According to Fitzgerald, Ambedkar, in foregrounding untouchability as the fundamental feature of the caste system, seemed to be using the Dumontian argument that power in India was subordinated to status, that is, to the purity-pollution axis of caste

ritual. Further, Ambedkar like Dumont, saw caste as the central problematic of Indian society, an assertion that, in the context of Dumont, is seen by Appadurai, Inden and Dirks as orientalist. Does one then on these grounds discount Ambedkar's analysis? Fitzgerald's argument is centred round this "absurd" possibility, around the suggestion, in short, that arguments about orientalism can go too far.

My strategy in reading Fitzgerald will be not so much to draw up arguments to counter either his specific objections to the writings of Inden, Dirks and Appadurai or his emphasis on the many merits of Dumont's work. It will be rather to suggest that there is an unresolvable tension in his argument between the conception of orientalism as the ideological counterpart of British colonialism and orientalism as an epistemological template. Earlier we saw this distinction spelt out by David Ludden who argued that post-1820 much empirical data from the colonies found their way to the centres of learning in Europe and became an integral part of knowledge-forms that were beginning to emerge under the legacy of the Enlightenment. Orientalism under this legacy was not merely a collocation of images that showed up South Asian society in a poor light and so in need of political governance from imperial Britain; it formed a thick matrix of knowledge about the relationship of Europe with the East, and was an integral part of the process of the production of certain key notions of western modernity – rights, citizenship, democracy and nationhood. It is a matrix that, as Breckenridge and Van der Veer have argued, continues to be hegemonic in both academic knowledge-formations and in the domain of public life and group politics in South Asia.

In light of the two usages of orientalism mentioned above, how does one read Fitzgerald's attempts to extricate Dumont and Ambedkar from the charge of orientalism? In the first

place, it is, of course, absurd to suggest that either Dumont or Ambedkar consciously set out to construct denigrating images of Indian society (in order to oppose them to the West, that is), which is the superficially ideological way in which Fitzgerald attributes the deployment of orientalism to the detractors of Dumont:

Though the modern-day Buddhists and Dalits, for whom Ambedkar is universally regarded as the ideological and political founder, would be no more likely than Inden to support imperialism, they would not assume that analyzing caste and its religious ideology as the fundamental problematic of Hindu civilization was merely part of an imperialistic tradition of constructing denigrating images (1996, 279).

Nevertheless, it is quite feasible to argue that orientalism constituted the theoretical horizon that *enabled* Ambedkar (Dumont's case has been argued earlier) to articulate his specific critique of Hindu India. His notion of caste and of its deep hierarchization as a loathsome manifestation of India's pre-colonial Hindu-ness, his attempts to establish an identity for the dalits that would be irrevocably and absolutely *different* from the Hindus, the high political stakes he placed in institutions of western modernity, his belief that the solution to the deep caste inequalities lay in the discourse of rights and citizenship – all of these coalesced into an eminently productive and efficacious political stance for Ambedkar and for the dalit movement subsequently.

And that is precisely the point about orientalism as hegemonic discourse. It enables, it is productive, and as numerous studies have shown, it continues to *inform* postcolonial practices in South Asia. As Breckenridge and Van der Veer put it:

Whether it is a matter of language and literature, communalism and the census, or caste and social science, orientalist theory casts its shadow over cultural politics in postcolonial India even though the specific politics of colonial domination are no longer relevant (11).

Fitzgerald's inability to accept that orientalism could constitute a discursive structure/horizon for Ambedkar's analysis of caste arises from a very limited understanding of the complexity and power of hegemonic discourses. He is unable to see the difference between situating Ambedkar's work thus, and of accusing him of kowtowing to western imperialism. A critique of the pervasiveness of colonial knowledge formations and political practice in the postcolonial world does not imply a wholesale rejection of all that is western. Nor does such critique have to couch itself in the language of conspiracy theories^{xii}. What such critique can do is mark those sites of political and cultural practice that have been smoothed over/overlooked/repressed by hegemonic discursive formations; for all such formations have what Laclau and Mouffe after Derrida call a "constitutive outside". Thus, when Appadurai critiques Dumont for making caste the *central* problematic of Indian society, he does not imply that caste is *incidental* to socio-political practice in India and should be relegated to the periphery of ethnographic accounts of India. The point of his critique is rather that if caste is granted a *foundational* status in ethnosocial representations of India, one loses sight of the fact that it owes its emergence in its present form to a complex process of historical sedimentation. Further, in assigning caste the status of an essence or foundation, the western social anthropologist performs a hegemonic sleight of hand whereby not only the discursivity of caste – its many contingent, shifting constructions – but also its deep interconnections with other social practices and institutions in South Asia, is rendered invisible. As for Ambedkar's considering caste as the key problematic of Indian society (and, like Dumont, seeing the purity/pollution axis as its cornerstone), Fitzgerald himself admits that this leader of the dalits read "untouchability" primarily through the idiom of *power* (279). This made Ambedkar engage with the problem of caste at the level of the discursive wherein he saw

the domain of the social and the political as fraught with antagonism between hegemonic constructions of caste and other articulations that such constructions sought to repress. In the process (as we shall see in chapter six) he was able to generate a powerful critique of what was predominantly a Hindu/Brahmanical nationalism. But his critique did not extend to a deconstructive reading of the genealogy of western liberal values that he so passionately endorsed. From our retrospective theoretical advantage over him – he had no postfoundationalist philosophers to fall back on – we can now say that such a reading would have enabled him to see the deep linkages between the tenets of western modernity he endorsed and the hegemonic articulations of caste that he opposed. Since I devote a whole chapter to Ambedkar’s critical engagement with caste, nationalism and modernity, I shall not at this stage go into any more details about the twists and turns of his numerous interventions and formulations. Suffice it to say, if Ambedkar did make caste and untouchability the cornerstone of his assessment of Indian society at the same time that the latter was, in the vision of the nationalists, awakening to its new role in an emerging global modernity, his intention was not so much to primordialize India, as to show how incomplete such an awakening would be if the nationalists did not forsake their upper-caste pieties. After all, as the Marathi dalit poet F.M. Shinde puts it: “Habit isn’t used to breaking out in feelings” (1993, 69). It is not that nationalist thought did not address the issue of the “sealed off, outcast, road-blocked” (Limbale 1993, 64) rights of the dalits. It is just that it assumed that its patronage and care would be adequate to contain two millennia of dalit suffering and rage. Little wonder then that the Punjabi dalit poet, Gurdas Ram Aalam makes Ambedkar respond to the nationalist gesture in these words:

Our soul cannot bear this suffering
 May be my nationality shifts
 But it cannot live on someone’s mercy.

(1998, 20)

In the chapter that follows I trace the trajectory of nationalist thought on caste and untouchability. In the process, I invoke the distinction drawn by Partha Chatterjee between the postcolonial “nation-state” and the “people-nation”:

Much that has been suppressed in the historical creation of postcolonial nation-states, much that has been erased or glossed over when nationalist discourse has set down its own life-history, bear the marks of the people-nation struggling in an inchoate, undirected and wholly unequal battle against forces that have sought to dominate it (1986, 170).

ⁱ Appadurai, in fact, in his essay, “Number in the Colonial Imagination”, goes on to argue that the colonial policies of quantification served a purpose beyond just administrative convenience. They were part of what he calls the “colonial *imaginaire*”, in the sense that they gave the British the *sense* of a “controllable indigenous reality” (1993, 317). I discuss Appadurai’s position later in this chapter.

ⁱⁱ The greater British focus on the consolidation of empire in India after the 1830s can be attributed to many politico-historical developments in Britain just preceding that period. John Gascoigne notes that from approximately 1776 to 1832 the British could give very little attention to its colonies as they were too caught up in upheavals in their own country. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries “the British state was chiefly concerned with resisting the threat of foreign domination or, to a lesser degree popular insurrection at home”. By mid-nineteenth century “greater stability at home and the development of more effective bureaucratic forms” allowed the “luxury of a coherent examination of the direction of imperial policy and a consideration of the ways in which the scattered threads of empire could be gathered together” (Gascoigne 1999, 54, “Empire” in Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age, ed Iain McCalman OUP).

ⁱⁱⁱ Among the more recent documentation of this epistemological consequence of colonial administrative practice is David Ludden’s brief account of the way colonial administrators Read and Munro convinced the British Parliament of the “rightness” of collecting revenue at the village-level instead of from *zamindars* (See Ludden 1993, 259-60).

^{iv} The category of “Scheduled Castes” was devised by the British and added to the Government of India Act of 1935. The independent Indian State retained its use and it has since served as a benchmark of the State’s commitment to affirmative action.

^v I read “caste” as marking the *aporia* of nationhood in the sense of situating it as an “undecidable in the face of which decisions must be reached”. See Spivak 1993, 93.

^{vi} See “Caste and the Census: Implications for Society and the Social Sciences”, by Satish Deshpande and Nandini Sundar (Economic and Political Weekly, 33.32, August 8, 1998, 2157-2159) and “Should Caste be Included in the Census” by Ambrose Pinto (Economic and Political Weekly, 33.31, August 1, 1998, 2058-2060).

^{vii} At the same time that Dumont was representing caste as a changeless, ineluctable essence of pre-colonial South Asia, a group of historians and social anthropologists such as C.A. Bayley, Bernard Cohn and C.T. Fuller, argued that caste in pre-colonial India had a dynamism, fluidity and adaptability in its complex linkages with politico-economic structures, and that the idea of an inflexible caste-based society was actually a colonial discourse that began circulating in the wake of British destruction of the complex pre-colonial politico-economic network of distribution. (See section above on “Caste and Colonial Discourse”). Such

historical accounts also showed that tribal and nomadic social organisation in India were actually antithetical to hierarchical caste structures and notions of purity and impurity.

^{viii} See his Writing Social History, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

^{ix} This is not to suggest that this “phrase-regime” is not hegemonic now. Much of social science research on the non-West continues to be informed by “development” or “modernization” paradigms. But critiques of these paradigms have also been prolific in recent years. In the discipline of history, one can cite the pioneering work of Subaltern Studies. For a recent critique of “development” from the perspective of ethnography see Mark Hobart (ed) An Anthropological Critique of Development, (London: Routledge, 1993). See also, Arturo Escobar’s Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995).

^x Dirks is, however, reflexive enough to add that a mere insertion of “history” into anthropology will not take care of the problems he has outlined.

^{xi} See for instance, his observation that “fieldwork, perhaps, at its best, is allegory”, his engagement with James Clifford’s notion of “textualization” in ethnographic fieldwork, and his speculation on the “retrievability” of caste (14-15).

^{xii} In the case of Ambedkar, an instance of this paranoia is seen in attempts in many so-called “nationalist” tracts, to brand Ambedkar as a “stooge” of the British, simply because he exposed the high Brahmanical bias of many of the leading nationalists and claimed that liberal democracy was the answer to India’s social and political inequalities. For the latest version of these accusations see Arun Shourie’s Worshipping False Gods: Ambedkar and the Facts Which Have Been Erased (New Delhi: ASA Publications, 1997).

CHAPTER THREE

THAT GHASTLY ABSTRACTION OF THE ORGANIZING MAN CASTE AND NATIONALISM

Nationalist version of...history consists of anachronism, omission, decontextualization and, in extreme cases, lies.

Eric Hobsbawm

In the early years of the twentieth century, when Europe for the first time engulfed more than half of humanity in warfare, an anguished yet prophetic voice rose from India to condemn the “terrible absurdity of the thing called the Nation” (1917, 74). The voice was that of Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore saw the War as retributive justice for a civilization that deified nationhood. As he put it, the War was “nothing but a volcano shattering itself with fearful convulsions, *the robber-civilization of Europe flaming to well-deserved ruin*” (7, emphasis added). Tagore’s critique of the nation-state was relentless. He saw it as the repository of all that was dehumanizing in European modernity:

The Nation has thriven long upon mutilated humanity. Men, the fairest creations of God, came out of the National manufactory in huge numbers as war-making and money-making puppets, ludicrously vain of their pitiful perfection of mechanism. Human society grew more and more into a marionette show of politicians, soldiers, manufacturers and bureaucrats, pulled by wire arrangements of wonderful efficiency (74).

In the same tract he lamented the eagerness with which he saw the dominant trajectory of the Indian nationalist movement endorsing the *political* apparatus of European modernity and directing all its energy towards the realization of an independent *nation-state*. He did

not see how a “political miracle of freedom” could be built upon the “quicksand of social slavery” (94). By the latter, of course, he meant primarily the caste system, but also all other forms of social inequality that India had accumulated over the centuries and which would not miraculously disappear the moment India gained political freedom. In near-prophetic terms he spoke of how “the same inertia which leads us to our idolatry of dead forms in social institutions will create in our politics prison-houses with immovable walls” (94). In short, Tagore saw the domain of the political as inherently insensitive to questions of *human* emancipation. One remembers his oft-quoted warning: “Those who have got their political freedom are not necessarily *free*; they are merely *powerful*” (93, emphasis added). Tagore’s critique of Indian nationalists’ desire for an independent nation-state (without India first undergoing a social revolution, that is) is reminiscent in many ways of Marx’s more complex exposition of the limits of political emancipation in his controversial tract of 1843, “On the Jewish Question”. As Marx so very lucidly put it:

The limits of political emancipation appear at once in the fact that the *state* can liberate itself from a constraint without man himself being *really* liberated; that a state may be a *free* state without man himself being a *free* man (1972, 30)

As is well known, Marx wrote this piece in response to a couple of studies by Bruno Bauer on the condition of Jews in a predominantly Christian Germany. So the “constraint” he refers to is that imposed by religion. But extrapolated onto Tagore’s critique of the “political” above, it could as well refer to caste. At the most obvious level what Marx seems to be saying is that while the modern nation-state can well distance itself from constraints imposed by several “pre-modern” social practices such as caste and religion by not endorsing the asymmetry they perpetuate, such distancing does not emancipate the “real” man from the effect of such asymmetry. That is why he says that the “*political* emancipation of the Jew or the Christian – of the *religious* man in general – is the

emancipation of the state from Judaism, Christianity and *religion* in general” (30). It is *not* the emancipation of a *particular* Jew, who would continue to bear the burden of his religious identity existentially. To that extent, the domain of the political cannot presume to contain within itself *all* the answers to the question of *human* emancipation.

As is by now clear, central to Marx’s critique of political emancipation is his conception of a hiatus that exists between man as a political being possessing rights under state-enforced laws, and man as a social being who has to constantly contend with tensions of everyday living (which include negotiating with structures and relations that are asymmetrical). In Marx’s text this hiatus is marked by his use of the term “abstract citizen” for the former and “real individual” for the latter. Marx then takes his argument further by stating that in liberal democracy, the domain of the political or the state acquires legitimacy precisely by *maintaining* this gap. To quote him at some length:

The state abolishes, after its fashion, the distinctions established by *birth, social rank, education, occupation*, when it decrees that birth, social rank, education, occupation are *non-political* distinctions; when it proclaims, without regard to these distinctions, that every member of society is an *equal* partner in popular sovereignty, and treats all the elements which compose the real life of the nation from the standpoint of the state. But the state, nonetheless, allows private property, education, occupation to *act* after *their* own fashion, namely as private property, education, occupation and to manifest their *particular* nature. Far from abolishing these *effective* differences, it only exists so far as they are presupposed; it is conscious of being a *political* state and manifests its *universality* only in opposition to these elements (31, emphasis original).

The fraught, profaneⁱ domain of the *social* in which the “egoistic” *real* man battles with ever proliferating difference thus constitutes the very condition of the possibility of the *political* in liberal democracy. The notion of rights and citizenship – the cornerstones of a bourgeois liberal state – is predicated precisely *on the absence of equality* between human

beings in civil society. It is this predication that is rendered invisible when, in liberal democratic nations, attempts are made not only to invoke *political* imperatives to redress *social* imbalances, but to assert that such imbalances can be contained/adequately addressed in/by the political discourse of rights and citizenship. In chapter one we saw that, in the context of caste relations, the notion of the performative brings to crisis the pedagogical imperatives of the nation state. The more the state attempts to constitutionally redress caste imbalances, the more firmly it succeeds in entrenching caste as a domain of effective difference in civil society. It is this paradox that the nationalists, in their eagerness to gain and then consolidate on India's political independence, could not foresee.

Many political theorists have attempted to map the horizon that enabled the post-independence Nehruvian era to articulate a *state-centred* idiom of rights. Satish Deshpande, for instance, argues that it was the Nehruvian emphasis on socialism, secularism and development, with the nation-state as the centre around which the above-mentioned discourses could be addressed, that led to a language of rights structured around "a predominantly state-centered idiom and a strong economic-developmental accent" (1998, PE-11). Since Nehruvian nationalism was committed to the project of modernity and upheld the legal-political power of the nation-state, what bearing could it have had on questions relating to caste? With the onset of political independence, how were modernity and liberal democratic principles projected on to the nation-space and the people-nation? The nation-space was conceptualized as "free from colonial domination and free to create a world untainted by inequalities of caste, class, community or gender" (Niranjana 1993, 1). In other words, as a utopian domain that rendered subaltern identities invisible. Thus, where the category of caste was concerned, to be "modern" was to disavow one's caste identity, At the same time, the modern, bourgeois-liberal, secular citizen-subject was so

constituted that if one did speak of caste it was as a marker of low-caste or dalit identity. Only the lower castes and, more so the dalits, bore the burden of the caste mark – a classic case of an excess of identification. It was an excess perpetrated by the liberal democratic nation-state when it appropriated the symbolic order of modernity to classify, categorize and taxonomize various subaltern groups. These groups with their newly acquired acronymic identity tags such as OBC (Other Backward Castes), SC (Scheduled Castes) and ST (Scheduled Tribes), became mere statistical configurations towards whom the state policy of affirmative action would henceforth be directed so that the Indian nation could honour its constitutional commitment to equality. For the secular, Indian citizen-subject (predominantly bourgeois, upper-caste male), the dalits and other oppressed groups such as the *adivasi* seemed to exist “only as a statistical macrostructural problem of policy at best, or as the deplorable primitive practices that infect, contaminate or corrupt the secular body politic at worst” (Dhareshwar 1993, 117). In other words, in the conception of nationalism as a “developmental” project, caste ideology and practice have been considered anomalous and detrimental by both the nation-state and its citizen-subject. It is in this tension generated between nationalist-statist attempts to render caste differences *invisible* (through the rhetoric of rights and citizenship) and, at the same time, to mark the body of the subaltern castes with an *excess* of identification – as SC or OBC – that there lies what Partha Chatterjee has called the “ambiguities of legitimation” (1993, 216) of the statist project of nationalism. They are ambiguities arising, first of all, from the fact that in a liberal democracy, the rhetoric of *political* emancipation is always predicated on the *absence* of “real” emancipation of individuals in the domain of the *social*. We saw Marx making this point in his essay “On the Jewish Question”. We also saw Tagore’s strictures on the vision of the statist nationalists who assumed that India’s social problems could be taken care of once she had political independence. Though Tagore did not spell it out in

any detail, the ambiguities inherent in statist nationalism are magnified when one looks at the formation of *postcolonial* nation-states. Such nation-states (especially when one looks at India, for instance), as Partha Chatterjee has pointed out, may have taken aboard the apparatus of colonial governmentality and thus the modern regime of power. But much before political independence, such colonized spaces witnessed forms of anti-colonial nationalism that “created...[their] domain of *sovereignty* within colonial society” (Chatterjee 6, emphasis added). According to the now well-known argument by Chatterjee, this split in nationalist thought was managed by relegating the articulation of an autonomous, anti-colonial nationalist discourse to the domain of the *community* while allowing colonial discourse to shape the *material* contours of the new independent *nation-state*. The impact of this “split” has been traced by Chatterjee in great detail and with great theoretical sophistication.

I do not, however, attempt to trace Chatterjee’s argument. Instead, in keeping with the discursive concerns of this section, I look at a text written in the nineteen-sixties that attempts to address this “split” but from the point of view of a disgruntled hegemonic nationalism, as seeing it in some sense responsible for India’s inability to attain the status of “pure” nationhood. I see it as a text that is symptomatic of the classic modernizing thrust that informs what Srirupa Roy has recently called “Official Nationalism” (1999). The text in question constitutes the final chapter of a much talked of scholarly exposition of caste by the eminent “nationalist” social anthropologist, G.S. Ghurye. His book is called Caste and Race in India and its first edition was published in London in 1932. It has since undergone four reprints, and in the last of those he added a few post-independence accounts of caste. It is one of those accounts I am interested in. Titled “A Casteless Society or a Plural Society”, this essay, through its relentless critique of the affirmative action

policies of subsequent Congress governments, plays out the tensions and ambiguities that arise from attempts to contain the centrifugal energy generated by community-centred discourses of nationalism, within the ambit of what is inherently a centripetal statist nationalism. Ghurye's essay is imbued with his anguish at what he sees as the dissipation of the nationalist ideal of creating a "casteless society". With each decade of extension of the reservation policy, the central and state governments seem bent on leading India to the "dangerous rocks of a plural society" (1969, 425). Extended periods of "reservation" are "ludicrous and un-constitutional" for they lead to "caste-patriotism" which in turn retards the "full growth of national consciousness" (437). Any "fair-minded person" or "patriotic Indian" ought to see that (440). Didn't the Democratic Republican Constitution of India guarantee Justice and Equality to every citizen of India and, in the process, "cut the very roots of caste"? (409). What then was the point of appointing several Commissions and Committees to pander to the demands of the numerous lower-caste factions? In 1961, when Nehru met the leaders of the "Convention of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Legislators", Ghurye wished that the Prime Minister, who was otherwise a "great leader, the staunchest protagonist of secularism and an ardent critic of caste-patriotism", had presented a "severely cold and chastizing front" (431). Instead, Nehru was merely "ambivalent". He did say of course how uncomfortable he felt with caste-based political fronts, and how he did not think that reservations should be extended indefinitely without regard to "merit" and "efficiency". But such statements were, as Ghurye saw it, not strong enough "reprimands". As the nationalist *par excellence*, as a leader who had fought hard to achieve the ideal of a united and integrated India, Nehru ought to have seen through the unscrupulous, self-centered and inevitably fissiparous demands of the SC and ST legislators who, in the Ghurye's opinion had "come together to secure a large size of the national cake by reservation, which may be leisurely divided and distributed among

themselves” (431). Note how close Ghurye comes to likening the “nation” to Zizek’s notion of the “Nation-Thing”ⁱⁱ, over which claims are staked, and which becomes an object, not only to be “enjoyed” by all legitimate citizens, but also to be jealously guarded against illegitimate partaking by “others”. Ghurye’s disgruntlement at the SC/ST constituencies attempting to “secure a large size of the national cake” can be seen as a precursor to the large-scale emotional conflagration of the upper-castes that erupted in 1990 in response to the State’s decision to implement the Mandal Commission report. All through Ghurye’s essay runs the rhetoric that the statist/nationalist resolution of the caste question was final and complete, and that the Constitution of India was the stark embodiment of such resolution. All caste demands that *exceeded* this statist pedagogy were necessarily detrimental to the health of the nation. We, thus, see Ghurye lamenting not only the alarming growth of caste-based politics, but also the post-independence proliferation of caste-based associations, trusts, journals and what-have-you in western, northern and southern India. For a “modern” nationalist like him, the performative space of the nation appears threatening and illegitimate, as something that “pollute[s] and corrupt[s] the rational processes of the state” (Chatterjee 1993, 226).

In what follows, I suggest that the scientism inherent in Ghurye’s argument is available only to those utterly confident of their dominant position within the nation-space. Such dominance undergoes a process of normalization when it seeks recourse in the discourse of abstract rights and citizenship. In the process it attempts to keep intact the asymmetrical power relations that characterize the domain of the people-nation in the first place. In his recent study of the Balmiki community in North India, Vijay Prashad uses the term “established anti-untouchability” (1999, 180) to point to the absences that inhabit the “enlightened social legislation” (181) of the State. Such legislation does not even begin to

address the advantages that the upper caste bourgeoisie have enjoyed throughout India's long history of caste exploitation. In fact, such advantages which give the upper-caste bourgeoisie a historical head start over the dalits, are ever so often rendered invisible in attempts to invoke notions of "merit", "efficiency" and "equal opportunity" every time the issue of affirmative action comes to the fore. Further, it is always the majoritarian nationalist who invokes images of integration and harmony when talking about liberal democratic nationhood. For the oppressed/minority, such images more often than not connote compliance with the existing social order. Hence, their democratic agenda is almost always antagonistic.

This antagonistic/contestatory dimension of democratic public life is what nationalists like Ghurye find threatening. For it encroaches on those spaces such nationalists inhabit as a matter of right. In Ghurye's writings, however, we also see reflected the confidence that comes with the cultural-historical privilege of being born a bourgeois Hindu/Aryan Brahman. The fact that his nationalism and patriotism have a Hindu Brahmanical, North-Indian/Aryan flavour is evident throughout the text under discussion. All non-Brahman movements are anathema to him and especially those emerging from Tamil Nadu. He documents in quite some detail the history of what he sees as the Tamil culture's aversion to Hinduism and Brahmanism. Here I cite two instances to illustrate Ghurye's version of what constitutes "true" India. In the first case, we see him agonizing over the attempt made by Annadurai, (the then Chief minister of Tamil Nadu) to translate the national motto "*Satyameva Jayate*" into Tamil. Such translation, Ghurye claims, is nothing short of sacrilege to Indian nationhood. How dare a lower-caste Tamilian upstart trifle with the sacrosanct Sanskrit of the *Upanishads*, and in the process deprive the "true" Indian of a glimpse of his glorious nationalist past?

The national motto, “Satyameva Jayate”, a sentence taken from an old *Upanishad*, is in Sanskrit language and is written in the Devanagari script. *The associations of the motto thus transport, or are expected to transport, Indians to their glorious past of two thousand five hundred years ago.* Annadurai’s action has destroyed the national motto as a national symbol which it has been such (sic) for the last seventeen years (355-56, emphasis added).

Note how Annadurai and his Tamil ilk are excluded from this special journey to India’s “glorious” past. The non-Brahman, non-Aryan claim to nationhood cannot but be counterfeit, and in some senses, a betrayal of the “genuine” claimants. A similar rhetoric informs Ghurye’s critique of the D.M.K government’s success in transforming parts of the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 by granting legitimacy to “Self-Respect” or “Reform” marriages. As is well known in dalit studies, the Self-Respect Movement initiated by Periyar in Tamil Nadu has been among the most politically charged dalit liberation movements of modern India. Ghurye interprets the D.M.K. government’s action as inimical not only to Hindu morality but also to Indian nationhood:

Such conditions as of (sic) avoidance of certain relationship between the spouses considered to be part and parcel of the moral code of a people would evidently be difficult of being observed (sic). Restriction of bigamy, an advance in morals and marital happiness, is of course non-existent. *The sentiment of Hindu India as a whole is flouted* and the right of any successful political party to change the Indian law of marriage for its own State of domination is asserted (459, emphasis added).

Ghurye’s writing, in its critique of lower-caste militancy and its assumption of the Hindu essence of the Indian nation, can be situated in the cusp of two dominant discourses of Indian nationalism that are hegemonic to this day. They are:

- The secular, liberal democratic “modern” discourse that attempts to focus on India’s Unity and Oneness by seeing its cultural diversity in the image of many small streams that would eventually converge to form an awesome yet harmonious national torrent
- The discourse of Hindutva that categorically traces the genealogy of the new nation to its hoary Hindu past and that, in its more benign form, expects non-Hindus to “fit in” and not claim any special benevolence from the State.

In many ways, both these discourses not only delve into cultural formations that have gone into the making of “modern” India, but they are also forms of contesting the *past* of Indian nationhood. Not surprisingly, much of such exploration/contestation has taken the form of written histories. In the paragraphs that follow, I initiate a reading of aspects of what can be said to constitute a “nationalist historiography”. My reading will by no means be exhaustive. For I limit my focus to the way “caste” tropes its way through nationalist histories.

In the previous chapter, we saw that orientalist and colonialist histories attempted to represent ancient and medieval India as a society engulfed in an immutable caste hierarchy and subjected to relentless despotic rule. Such histories were, as Nehru put it in his The Discovery of India (1956), “bitterly resented” (287) by Indians with a growing nationalist consciousness who were “forced to study in their schools and colleges so-called histories which disparage[d] India’s past in every way, vilif[ied] those whose memory they cherish[ed], and honour[ed] and glorif[ied] the achievements of the British rule in India” (289). According to Nehru, what made such colonialist historical representations worse was the fact that “the British who came to India were not political or social revolutionaries; they were conservatives representing the most reactionary social class in England, and

England was in some ways one of the most conservative countries in Europe” (289). Colonialist histories faced their first significant challenge in the early years of the twentieth century when nationalist historians in India undertook the task of reinterpreting India’s past, and more significantly, of attempting to unyoke such interpretation from colonialist categories of representation. It is by now a theoretical commonplace that the genealogy of the modern historiography in postcolonial societies can be traced to “contestations with forms of colonial knowledge” (Chatterjee 1994, 2). It is also acknowledged, however, that such contestations have not led to a complete abjuration of the epistemological template that informed colonialist accounts of India. This, in fact, constitutes the burden of Partha Chatterjee’s argument in his highly influential book, Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse (1986). But almost thirty years before Partha Chatterjee theorized about the intimate links between nationalist thought and colonial discourse, India’s renowned Marxist historian, D.D. Kosambi, anticipating Chatterjee’s argument, wrote:

Where Vincent Smith’s work, as revised for our consumption under the British rule, contained glorification of empire, of strong central rule, of firmness on the part of the ruler and loyalty on that subject, the present tendency is to prove that we Indians were as good as the conquerors, with a past no less glorious than anyone else’s. *Only this proof is being attempted with borrowed European standards of evidence, logic and ratiocination* grafted upon all the imponderable metaphysics of sanctified Hinduism (1954, 68).

Thus, for instance, while we see nationalist histories and numerous other nationalist tracts rejecting pejorative colonial stereotypes of ancient India, we also see them strategically deploying the orientalist distinction between the West and the East to their advantage. As Leela Gandhi puts it:

Orientalist discourse was strategically available not only to the empire but also to its antagonists...the affirmative stereotypes attached to this discourse were instrumental in fashioning the “East” as a utopian alternative to Europe. Countless scholars, writers, polemicists, spiritualists, travellers and wanderers invoked Orientalist idealisations of India to critique – in the spirit of Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj* – the aggressive capitalism and territorialism of the modern West (1998, 78).

Where nationalist historiography was concerned, it accepted the orientalist construction of an essential India, but transformed the terms of reference. India, for these historians, was not the decrepit, religious-and-caste-ridden static social organism of the orientalist historiography. Rather, ancient India was seen as a seamless, yet dynamic entity that saw the rise and fall of grand emperors and dynasties amidst the flourishing of the vibrant Sanskrit civilization. As Romila Thapar says:

Ancient India was visualized by these writers as a comparatively unchanging society over the period from 1000 B.C. to A.D 1000, with a uniformly high quality of achievement; the basis of this stability was the ancient Aryan culture (1968, 327).

Many historiographers and political theorists have commented on the contributions made by nationalist historians towards reorienting conceptual frameworks so that certain “facts” about India could be rescued from colonial misreadings and be seen in a more “appropriate” light. Thus, for instance, Ranajit Guha, Sudipta Kaviraj and Partha Chatterjee have analyzed the writings of the nineteenth century Bengali nationalist, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, to show that the emergence of a nationalist consciousness was intimately bound up with, first of all, the reclamation of an autonomous cultural space from which to address questions of subjugation, power and representation.ⁱⁱⁱ To reclaim the right and ability to tell one’s own story was for Bankim the first step towards developing a nationalist consciousness. Since the specifics of Bankim’s reading of India’s

past has been analyzed only too well by the scholars mentioned above and will be available to any informed reader, I shall not go into them myself.

What I wish to foreground instead are those features of nationalist historiography that have a direct bearing on the question of caste. One of the first things that the nationalist historians did was to invert the colonialist/orientalist model so that Indian history began to be traced in terms of power and kinship patterns rather than in terms of stultifying caste structures. This was done to prove to the colonialist historians that India has been capable of governing itself politically, and that, contrary to Hegel's conception, an arcane form of civil society *did not* engulf the State. At the same time, the existence of caste as an inalienable feature of Indian society could not be wished away. In what terms then was caste woven into this history?

The Indian nation began to be imagined in terms of a harmonious Hindu community, and the four-fold division of castes, or *Vardhnamashramadharmā*, was seen to integrate the parts into the whole. The notion of hierarchy was however abjured and discriminatory social practices criticized. Gandhi, of course, was the most celebrated proponent of this mode of nationalist thought. But we see a version of it in Tagore's Nationalism and in Nehru's The Discovery of India. Tagore, in writing about India's toleration and incorporation of many races, considered the caste system in ancient India as an epitome of racial and ethnic harmony:

India tolerated differences of races from the first, and that spirit of toleration has acted all through her history. *Her caste system is the outcome of this spirit of toleration.* For India has all along been trying experiments in evolving a social unity within which different peoples could be held together, while fully enjoying the freedom of maintaining their own differences (89, emphasis added).

He, of course, goes on to criticize the fossilization of the caste system which he sees as life-denuding for the great civilization: "Life [has] departed from her social system and in its place she is worshipping with all ceremony the magnificent cage of countless compartments that she has manufactured" (90).

As for Nehru, in chapter six of his monumental work, we see him speculating on the possibilities of colonial rule dismantling old forms of social organization (among which, of course, he counts the caste system), and the effect of such dismantling on Indian society. While he is categorical in his denunciation of high-caste atrocities against the untouchables, he is not too sure if a large-scale breakdown of the caste-structured society would augur well for India:

The breakdown of a huge and long-standing social organization 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, unless some other social structure, more suited to the times and to the genius of the people, takes its place (243).

Instead of suggesting what "some other social structure" might consist of, Nehru goes on to draw a rather cosy picture of a "non-competitive", "non-acquisitive" pre-Mughal caste-based social organization, which, under the benign eye of Hinduism, catered to the needs of each group and generally provided social harmony. The untouchables were, no doubt, treated badly, but "they had their own panchayats or caste councils for settling their own affairs", and of course, these panchayats "function[ed] democratically" (251). Further, since most of the population depended on agriculture and since there was no concept of private property, "every group from the state to the scavenger was a shareholder in the

produce” (249). In short, we have here a tableau of Hindu society that bespeaks social, harmony, security and solidarity:

The old Indian social structure had...some virtues.... Behind it lay the philosophical ideal of Indian culture – the integration of man and the stress of (sic) goodness, beauty and truth rather than acquisitiveness. An attempt was made to prevent the joining together and concentration of honour, power and wealth. The duties of the individual and the group were emphasized, not their rights. The *Smritis* (Hindu religious books) give lists of dharmas, functions and duties, of various castes, but none of them contains an inventory of rights. Self-sufficiency was aimed at in the group, especially in the village, and in a different sense, in the caste (252).

But as is well known, Nehru was too much a product of European modernity not to see the “datedness” of the Hindu societal organization. The cause of its petrification and subsequent decay lay, according to Nehru, in its disregard for individual aspirations and liberty, and its continued exploitation of the untouchables. By the time the British arrived, Indian society was badly in need of a radical change. An encounter with western modernity was inevitable. While Nehru saw colonial governance as an unmitigated evil, he never ceased to appreciate the merits of India’s exposure to western civilization that came in the wake of colonial rule:

The impact of western culture on India was the impact of a dynamic society, of a “modern” consciousness, on a static society wedded to mediaeval habits of thought which, however sophisticated and advanced in its own way could not progress because of its inherent limitations (289).

As the prospect of political independence drew near, Nehru was more and more convinced that the issue of caste inequality would be taken care of once the Indian State wholeheartedly embraced the principles of liberal democracy. His mode of nationalism, thus, began to be increasingly enunciated from the vantage point of statism, with all the omissions and absences the latter connoted. It was left to Mahatma Gandhi and to his dalit

“adversary” Babasaheb Ambedkar, to thrash out the question of caste and untouchability from the communal domain of the “people-nation”. The clash between Ambedkar and Gandhi on the resolution of the caste question has been documented extensively and so I shall not revisit the details here. Instead, I propose to look at a text titled My Soul’s Agony that I see as articulating what Partha Chatterjee has called the “inner” or the “spiritual” dimension Indian nationalist thought, a dimension that resists the “material” encroachment of the colonial state (1993). This text is a compilation of statements on untouchability issued by Gandhi in 1932 from Yeravada prison after the finalization of the Poona Pact on 24 September of the same year. In what is now a well-known fact in the history of political representation of the untouchables, the Poona Pact was an agreement reached between the caste Hindu communities and the representation of the Depressed Classes to stop the British government from granting the latter separate electorates in provincial and central legislatures. The idea of separate electorates for the untouchable castes was raised by the British government and avidly seconded by Ambedkar and other leaders of the “depressed classes” as they were called then. But Gandhi saw this political gesture on the part of the British as an attempt to divide the Hindu community and so decided to stake his life in his opposition to it. It was his subsequent fast-unto-death that brought his opponents to the signing table. Ambedkar, of course, never forgave Gandhi for it.

In My Soul's Agony, Gandhi makes it very clear that eradication of untouchability is the *sole* responsibility of the Hindu *community* and not that of the colonial *state*. In an issue of Harijan he had said:

I have met them [untouchables] in Malabar and Orissa and am convinced that if they are ever to rise, it will not be by reservation of seats but...by the strenuous work of the Hindu reformers in their midst, and it is because I feel that this

separation would have killed all prospect of reform that my whole soul has rebelled against it (1988, 114)

Gandhi saw Hindu religion and Hindu social structures as containing within themselves the potential to undo the harm done by exploitative caste practices. That is why his insistence that the untouchables needed to be brought *back* into the Hindu fold, and his assertion that penance by caste Hindus would enable Hinduism to *regain* its spiritual power as a “living faith designed to satisfy the most exacting conscience, the deepest thinker and the godliest person” (1932,17). As he says in the epigraph to My Soul’s Agony: “It will only be out of the ashes of untouchability that Hinduism can revive, and thus purified become a vital and vitalizing force in the world”. Since Gandhi was bent on assimilating the untouchables into the Hindu fold, his programme for their rehabilitation not surprisingly focussed on practices such as interdining, intermarriage and temple entry, practices that radical dalit leaders like Ambedkar interpreted as being so dependent on the benevolence of the caste Hindus as to constitute no fundamental challenge to the status quo. We see Ambedkar’s qualms substantiated ever so often in the text under discussion. In spite of his insistence to the contrary^{iv}, Gandhi time and again betrays a patronizing stance in addressing the issue of eradicating untouchability. At one stage in the text, he takes on Ambedkar’s comment that “temple-entry” was not a cause sufficiently worthy for Gandhi to undertake a fast-unto-death. Gandhi, unable to plumb the depths of Ambedkar’s critique, ironically imputes to the latter a bourgeois elitism from which of course, as will be clear, Gandhi himself is hardly exempt:

I do not take the light view that Dr. Ambedkar does of the temple entry question... Nothing in my opinion will strike the imagination of the Hindu mass mind, including Harijans, as the throwing open of all public temples to them precisely on the same terms as to (sic) Caste Hindus. I can understand *Dr. Ambedkar's comparative indifference*, but I am not thinking of the *few cultured men* belonging to the Depressed

Classes. I am thinking of the *uncultured dumb many*. After all, Hindu temples play a most important part in the life of the masses, and *I who have been trying all my life to identify myself with the most illiterate and downtrodden*, cannot be satisfied until all the temples are open to the outcastes of Hindu humanity (1932, 14-15, emphasis added).

In one rhetorical stroke he nullifies Ambedkar's claim to dalit leadership – by underscoring what he sees as the latter's *distance* from the untouchable masses – and appropriates the mantle onto himself. However, no one who has read Ranajit Guha's A Disciplinary Aspect of Indian Nationalism (1991) and Shahid Amin's essay in Subaltern Studies III, "Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921-2" (1984), can afford to overlook the tensions and irony that underpin Gandhi's claim of "identifying" himself with the "most illiterate and the downtrodden". His very use of the terms "uncultured" and "dumb" highlights his distance and difference from the masses he claims to represent. In fact, as Guha has shown, ever so often the rhetoric of nationalists such as Gandhi and Nehru emphasized the wild, unruly, chaotic, unsophisticated, unintelligent nature of the masses, and both often spoke of "taming" and "disciplining" this wildness in order to channel it towards a more "appropriate" expression of nationalism. Witness for, instance, Gandhi's advice to the caste Hindu worker for the Harijan cause:

Workers in the Harijan cause...must come in closest touch with *utterly unsophisticated, innocent, ignorant men and women who might be likened to children in intelligence....* I write from experience of such cases (1988, 127, emphasis added).

This is a mode of nationalist thought that mimics the notion of the colonizer's "civilizing mission" directed at "less" developed communities and collectivities. What better example can there be of the "civilizing" thrust of Gandhi's amelioration programme for the

untouchables, than his injunction to the Harijan workers to focus on a literal cleansing of their bodies:

Harijan workers should...devote all their energy to: (i) promotion of cleanliness and hygiene among the Harijans (ii) improved methods of carrying on what are known as unclean occupations, e.g. scavenging and tanning (iii) giving up of carrion and beef if not meat altogether (iv) giving up of intoxicating liquor (1932, 32).

As any caste Hindu would recognize in this inventory of “Harijan” practice, Gandhi’s “constructive” project for the untouchable masses was completely predicated on the notion of assimilation into Hindu society. As he put it: “I have no other end to serve than to see *Sanatana Dharma* revived and lived in its reality in the lives of millions who at present seem to me to deny it” (1932, 111). There was no space in his formulation for a radical critique of Hinduism of the kind that Ambedkar later undertook and which culminated in his walking out of the “Hindu” fold with eighty-thousand dalits in 1956.

That may well account for the reason why it was Gandhi rather than Ambedkar who was considered as the undisputed champion of the untouchables in the “nationalist” years preceding and following political independence. The fact that Gandhi’s stance on untouchability constituted a mere rap on the Hindu knuckle rather than a throwing out of the Hindu baby with the bath-water of untouchability, made it a lot less unsettling for the Hindu-dominated majority of independent India. Images of Gandhi uplifting and redeeming untouchables circulated in the domain of popular culture through the whole of the nineteen-forties and the fifties. One remembers, among others, Bimal Roy’s film, *Sujata* (1959), where the adopted untouchable daughter of an upper-caste Hindu family awakens to her full humanity only after she is told by her upper-caste “liberal” admirer that men of the stature of Buddha and Gandhi had dedicated their whole lives to the upliftment

of untouchables like her and that her despair ought not to “shame” their legacy. There is not a hint of Ambedkar’s role in this liberal-nationalist portrayal of the story of caste inequality in modern India. Instead, in a scene replete with symbols of Gandhian nationalism, we see the untouchable heroine, Sujata, weeping at the feet of what constitutes a mural of the Mahatma. Again, just as she is about to contemplate suicide by jumping into the Ganges, her saree gets caught in a nail on a plaque on which are inscribed Gandhi’s words:

*Mare Kaise / Atmahatya Karke / Kabhie Nahi
Avashyakta Ho To Zinda Rehne Ke Liye Mare*

(How do I die / By committing suicide/ Never
If necessary I shall die so that I can live).

Such narratives could barely grapple with the complex issue of representation in the cultural politics of caste in independent India. The Gandhian stance on untouchability constituted for the social realist film maker, Bimal Roy, the nodal point of social reconstruction in a nation trying to pull itself together. He could not begin to accommodate in his narrative a politics of difference and antagonism which is what Ambedkar and the dalit movement subsequently represented. In contrast, the Gandhian agenda seemed much less threatening to the ideal of national integration.

Gandhi’s endorsement of *varnashramadharm*a and his conception of caste categories as “non-competitive functional division of labour” (Chatterjee 1993, 174) was, however, open to recuperation by a form of militant Hinduism that was beginning to surface in the nineteen-twenties and thirties, and which had a direct bearing on the writing of nationalist histories. The idea of a glorious Hindu past was reiterated fiercely in the tracts of Savarkar and Golwalkar and, as Romila Thapar has shown, the Gupta period (320-540 A.D) was

celebrated as the Golden Age because it symbolized the age of “renascent Hinduism” (Thapar, 329). That for the untouchable castes this same period was a “Dark Age” was something that the Hindu nationalist historical tracts deliberately suppressed. Further, all non-Hindu historical traces were treated with suspicion – whether it was Buddha or the Muslims. While it would be unfair and even dangerous to collapse Gandhian nationalism into this strain of militant Hinduism, one can hardly ignore how much slippage there is, and has been between Indian nationalist and Hindu communalist discourses. As the historian Sumit Sarkar says:

The enormous overlap in personnel, assumptions and symbols between mainstream Indian nationalism and Hindu communalism is too obvious to need much elaboration. One can think of the “*Bande Mataram*” hymn-cum-slogan central to much anti-British patriotism and at the same time a Hindu rallying cry, at least in Bengal, during confrontation with Muslims.... A more dramatic example would be the murder of the Mahatma by Nathuram Godse: both these protagonists in that total confrontation of January 30, 1948, could, in some senses, be called nationalists and pious Hindus and for both Rama was a central icon (1996, 271).

Such slippage was facilitated by the fact that most Indian nationalist leaders and nationalist historians were predominantly upper-caste Hindus. Not surprisingly, the image of subcontinental unity was configured in Aryan-Hindu terms with disastrous consequences for Hinduism’s Others – the dalits and the Muslims.

We need only look at the attempted histories of militant Hindu nationalists such as Savarkar and Golwalkar to see how a “culturalist, rightward redefinition of nationalism” (Ahmad 1996, 294) with its rhetoric of exclusivism, hate and even terror, was as much a part of the imagining of the new Indian nation as was the liberal, secular, democratic Nehruvian nationalism. In fact, Savarkar’s historical tract, Six Glorious Epochs of Indian

History, written in 1963, and first published in 1971, begins with the same critique of “distorted” colonialist accounts of India’s past that we saw Nehru articulating in The Discovery of India. Such critique is combined with an assertion of his “duty” as a patriotic Indian to redeem India’s honour and lost pride, and of his commitment to the ideal of historical truth^v:

When our country was smarting under the British sway, many English writers had so much perverted the Indian history and obliged two or three generations of Indian students in their schools and colleges to learn it in such a way, that not only the rest of the world but even our own people were misled. Absurd and malicious statements implying that India as a nation has always been under some foreign rule...or that Indian history is an unbroken chain of defeat after defeat of the Hindus, have been used like currency and are accepted by our people without affront or remonstrance or even a formal protest.... That is why I have decided to describe the historical achievements of those generations and of their representative leaders who vanquished the aggressors from time to time and liberated their country (5).

It should come as no surprise that Savarkar’s choice of six “glorious” epochs coincides with the reign of six Hindu monarchs through ancient and medieval India. His account of each of the six follows a predictable pattern: description of an attack by a “foreign” aggressor and liberation from the aggressors by each of the valiant and aggressive Hindu monarchs. In the process, of course, no energy is spared in reviling those “fanatics, vulgar, vain-glorious Muslims” (9) and those “anti-national Buddhists” (62). Ashoka, the great Mauryan emperor who renounced violence and embraced Buddhism, is described as a “zealot” who left no stone unturned to destroy the might of Hinduism. His Buddhist practice of “ahimsa” or non-violence is seen as being responsible for Hinduism’s losing its aggressive cutting edge. Ashoka, according to Savarkar “transformed the whole empire into a gigantic Buddhist monastery and converted the fighting warriors into saffron-clad

Buddha bhikkus” (73). We, in fact, see Savarkar tracing a pattern of Buddhist “treachery” across generations. The Buddhists apparently aided and abetted Muslim invaders and in effect played not a small role in consolidating Muslim rule in India (134). Their subsequent suffering at the hands of the Muslims was, thus, an ironic retribution of sorts. Savarkar then goes on to state that, contrary to the claim of the dalit Buddhists such as Ambedkar, untouchability actually flourished during the Buddhist period of Indian history:

One avoidable result of the *violent* way in which the Buddhists tried to establish the principle of “Ahimsa”, and of their declaring animal-hunting and flesh-eating punishable by death, of their over-enthusiastic and relentless efforts to search out such offenders and give the harshest capital and other severe punishments, was that the practice of untouchability instead of being wiped out became still more firmly rooted, widespread and most distressing (140, emphasis added).

This diatribe against Buddhism is then followed by a predictable analysis of the caste-system as a social organization committed to the preservation and welfare of the *Hindu* race – “It must be...admitted that the Hindus of those times created...this caste-system with the sole objective of protecting their racial seed and blood” (158) – and a “powerful unifying *national* sentiment” (159, emphasis added).

The Indian Marxist historian, Sumit Sarkar, has recently suggested that the rhetoric of Hindutva nationalism in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has had as much (if not more) to do with the rise of lower-caste and dalit consciousness in the same period as (than) with the political demand of a separate Muslim nation (1997). Many Hindu nationalist tracts read lower-caste movements as a betrayal of nationalist interests and as a sign of the degeneration of Hindu society. In the Savarkar tract under discussion we see an added anxiety about the conversion of untouchables to other religions, and especially to Islam (160-61). We see especially an anxiety about loss of Hindu numbers, that is, the loss

of demographic advantage over minority groups. Savarkar's bitterness towards Buddhism in his text can also, no doubt, be attributed to his displeasure at the Ambedkar-led mass scale conversion of the Mahar community to Buddhism in 1956. In a recent work titled Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity and Belief (1998), Gauri Vishwanathan talks of the politically and culturally unsettling experience of "conversion", especially on the majority community:

Not only does conversion alter the demographic equation within a society and produce numerical imbalances, but it also challenges an established community's assent to religious doctrines and practices. With the departure of members from the fold, the *cohesion* of a community is under threat just as forcefully as if its *beliefs* had been turned into *heresies* (xi, emphasis added).

We see this anxiety about communal cohesiveness and the sanctity of religious-cultural beliefs and practices played out in the writings of both Savarkar and Golwalkar. Thus, Savarkar talks with approval and with traces of nostalgia of the fact that, in ancient Hindu India, the barriers between the upper and lower castes were seen by the latter not as shackles or chains but as "charmed amulets or protecting bands" (159) against social anarchy. Golwalkar, in turn, invokes the Rigvedic *Purushasukta* theory of the origin of castes to argue against the rise of lower-caste dissent:

Merely because the various limbs and organs in a body appear different and play their own specific functions, should we call them different "classes" and proceed to remove them all to make the body a "classless" entity. If we do that, will that be evolution or murder? (1966, 100)

In both cases we see their anxiety clearly arising from what they saw as an "alarming" increase in lower-caste and dalit militancy:

In their heart of heart, very few...anti-caste zealots experience the sense of unity that can transcend all the present-day perversities. Anti-caste tirade has verily become

a mask for them to strengthen their own positions among their caste fellowmen (Golwalkar, 110).

Not surprisingly, both, like Gandhi, upheld the sanctity of *varnashramadharma* or the fourfold division of castes; except that Gandhi made non-violence and removal of untouchability the precondition of a harmonious social order, while Savarkar, Golwalkar and other militant Hindu nationalists were more interested in “reinstating” an aggressive Hindu nation-state, one that would not grant any favours to the “others” of Hinduism or treat minorities with any semblance of special regard.

In the last decade or so, Savarkar’s vision of a Hindu nation-state has been invoked ever so often, and in the realm of *realpolitik*, the RSS-BJP-VHP combine has attempted to draw together many strands of nationalist thought to argue for the importance of a majoritarian nationalism. Not surprisingly, this Hindutva combine has reserved most of its vitriolic critique for the left-liberal strand of nationalism which it sees as somehow alien to the process of imagining an “authentic” India. Its stance towards lower-caste political combines has been more ambivalent, and in states such as Maharashtra it is no longer unusual to see dalit leaders courting, or being courted by Hindutva groups.^{vi} Perhaps that could be accounted for by the fact that the Hindutva groups, especially in Maharashtra, no longer have to contend with the fear of a “slipping hegemony” that they experienced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when lower-caste movements appeared to have been gaining quick politico-cultural ground. Or they have realized that incorporation/assimilation of dalits would serve them better at the polls than open antagonism, which more often than not has driven dalits and other subaltern groups into the arms of either religious minorities (through conversion, that is) or left-of-centre political parties. This connection between the rise of militant Hindu nationalism and the

articulation of lower-caste and dalit protests in Maharashtra has been traced in some detail by Tapan Basu *et.al* in their book Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags (1993). Here is a brief account of their general argument:

The centrality of Maharashtra in the formation of the ideology and organization of Hindutva in the mid-1920s might appear rather surprising, as Muslims here were a small minority and hardly a threat, and there had been no major riots in this region during the early 1920s. But Maharashtra had witnessed a powerful anti-Brahmin movement of the backward castes from 1870 onwards, when Jyotiba Phule had founded his Satyashodhak Samaj. By the 1920s, the Dalits, too, had started organizing themselves under Ambedkar. Hindutva in 1925 as in 1990-91, was an upper caste bid to restore a slipping hegemony (10-11)

What these and other theses on the complex connection between caste and hegemonic nationalist discourses highlight is the inability of the latter to comprehensively address questions of structural imbalance in the domain of the “people-nation”. Contrary to Aijaz Ahmad’s reservations about it,^{vii} Partha Chatterjee has quite appropriately characterized our nationalist movement in terms of what Gramsci had called a “passive revolution”. That is, a movement in which there is a semblance of mass participation and establishment of democratic norms, but which, in effect, does not challenge entrenched structural imbalances in society. While totalitarian nationalist imaginings such as those of Savarkar and other extremist Hindutva groups are blatant in their opposition to any form of radical democratic mobilization, the more benign, democratically-oriented forms of nationalism neutralize radical articulations of democratic opposition by appearing to take on board questions of social inequality, but addressing them in a language that disciplines difference – equality before law, equal opportunities for all, granting special privileges to minorities in order to eventually assimilate them into the mainstream. In effect, they “construct a simulacrum popular movement while perpetuating structural inequality” (Smith 1998,

181). I end as I began this chapter, with Tagore and his deep insight into this anomaly we call the Nation:

With the growth of power the cult of the self-worship of the Nation grows in ascendancy, and the individual willingly allows the Nation to take donkey-rides upon his back; and there happens the anomaly which must have such disastrous effects, that the individual worships with all sacrifices a god which is morally much inferior to himself (73).

ⁱ The term “profane” was used by Marx in a semi-ironical way to connote man’s existence in civil society. His irony was directed at Hegel who conceived of the State as the ultimate realization of the World Spirit. Here’s Marx: “The political state, in relation to civil society, is just as spiritual as is heaven in relation to earth. It stands in the same opposition to civil society, and overcomes it in the same manner as religion overcomes the narrowness of the profane world.... Man, in his most *intimate* reality, in civil society, is a profane being” (32, emphasis original).

ⁱⁱ See Slavoj Zizek’s “Eastern Europe’s Republics of Gilead” in Chantal Mouffe ed., Dimensions of Radical Democracy, (London: Verso, 1992), 193-207.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Ranajit Guha, An Indian Historiography of India: A Nineteenth-Century Agenda and its Implications (Calcutta 1988), Partha Chatterjee, Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse (London, 1986) and Sudipta Kaviraj, Bankimchandra and the Making of Nationalist Consciousness (Calcutta, 1989), The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India (Delhi & New York, 1995).

^{iv} See for instance p.71 of My Soul’s Agony where Gandhi declares: “The removal of untouchability is *not a matter of bestowing patronage on Harijans*. It is one of penance and purification by the caste Hindus”. (emphasis added).

^v Savarkar, of course, does not carry his critique of colonialist historical sources very far. In the work under discussion we see him ever so often invoke the authority of Vincent Smith to underscore his own glorification of the aggressive rule of Hindu monarchs such as Pushyamitra. See, for instance, p.80 and p.132. In the latter instance, in fact, he uses Vincent Smith to refute Ambedkar’s reading of ancient Indian history. We have here a glimpse of the anti-dalit, anti-lower caste energy of the Hindu nationalism: “Smith has thus completely refuted the extravagant and vulgar remarks of Dr.Ambedkar on Hindu history” (132).

^{vi} In the 1998 General Elections, for instance, the renowned Dalit poet and leader of the Dalit Panthers, Namdeo Dhasal, contested for a seat from Pune by entering into an electoral alliance with the Hindu extremist group, the Shiv Sena.

^{vii} See for instance, p.232 and p.238 in Ahmad’s essay “Fascism and National Culture” published in Lineages of the Present (New Delhi: Tulika 1996). Ahmad accuses Chatterjee of appropriating Gramsci’s thought without displaying any awareness of the political context in which the latter made his formulations. The effect, Ahmad claims, is one of “domesticating” the revolutionary potential of Gramsci’s thought. He, of course, doesn’t see any problems with his *own* reading of the phenomenon of Hindutva in terms of a Gramscian conceptual apparatus. My only intervention would be to suggest that Ahmad could perhaps open his mind to the fact that “theories” and “concepts” travel and that, in the process, they accumulate traces from other histories and cultures that do not necessarily render them inauthentic or even powerless and tame. Ahmad’s own “Marxist” allegiances ought to tell him that. Alternatively, he can look at the intellectually and politically engaging way in which Laclau and Mouffe “appropriate” Gramsci. On second thoughts one had better not suggest that to him. Could he bear the prospect of “poststructuralists” tampering with Gramsci?

CHAPTER FOUR

AN INTRACTABLE DUALISM CASTE AND MARXISM

These are not good times to be a Marxist.

Bryan Palmer

In the previous chapter we traced the trajectory of nationalist thought on caste. More specifically, we saw how unsettling a figuration caste has been in the hegemonic imaginings of the Indian nation and how it continues to exceed the pedagogical imperatives of the nation-state. In this chapter I focus on yet another discursive take on caste, that of Marxism and its very distinctive articulations within the secular-democratic tradition of Indian nationalism.

Anti-Caste Movements, Nationalism and the Left

Marxism in much of the colonized Third World could not but link class struggle with the struggle for national liberation. In India it was M.N. Roy who in the nineteen-twenties voiced his displeasure at the form of bourgeois nationalism that he saw incarnated in the figure of the Indian National Congress. As Sanjay Seth in his book Marxist theory and Nationalist Politics (1995) notes, M.N. Roy was convinced that “the Indian bourgeoisie could not lead a successful nationalist movement, and that such a movement could only be led to victory by workers and peasants” (87). Roy then embarked on his “pedagogical” project of providing the nationalist movement a proper “theoretical” underpinning in the form of Marxism. It was a project he hoped would free the nationalist struggle from

“subjectivism”, “sentimental agitation” and “abstract idealism”.ⁱ As has been well documented, Roy’s role in initiating a communist movement in India did not last beyond the nineteen-twenties. But he did succeed in enthusing many nationalist youths with the notion that “to be worthwhile, a revolution should liberate the toiling masses of India from their present economic position” (cited in Nigam 1999, 39). As Saroj Mukherjee of the Communist Party of India (CPI) notes in his autobiography:

We wanted the freedom of the country. We wanted to usher in an arrangement wherein the people could live in happiness after driving out the British rulers. In what misery do the workers, peasants, the people of the villages and the industrial areas live! We wanted an end to that state of affairs.... That was the thought we were obsessed with.ⁱⁱ

While the communist movement never gained centre stage in India’s nationalist struggle, the socialist aspirations of her representative nationalist, Jawaharlal Nehru, are well known. Also well documented is the very specific mode of his transaction with Marxismⁱⁱⁱ which, to put it briefly, entailed taking on board Marxism’s concern with economic inequality and combining it with his faith in Enlightenment rationalism. The economic dimension of Marxism provided Nehru with an adequate rational or scientific basis for his project of modernizing India that did not preclude questions of social and economic equality. Not surprisingly, it was a nationalism that was not “revolutionary” enough in Marxist terms. For, as Seth puts it, Nehru never assigned “a preponderant role to the working class in the struggle for national liberation” (216). The interests of the oppressed classes were sought to be represented not by a party of workers but by the dominant nationalist party at the time of independence, the Indian National Congress, a party often dubbed as a conglomeration of Brahmins, capitalists and landlords by its critics. The socialist idea of collective ownership of property meant under the Congress regime, State ownership. Notwithstanding his important role in giving the Indian National Congress

(INC) a distinctly leftist flavour in the middle and late thirties, Nehru was a firm advocate of state-sponsored capitalism and top-down initiatives. How then did caste-based movements figure under such a scheme of things? It appeared to be a given that only the anti-imperialist, secular nationalist movement represented by its political arm, the Indian National Congress, constituted the heart of India's democratic revolution and that the various workers' and peasants' mobilizations allied with it in complex but not antagonistic ways. However, mobilizations on the basis of caste or religion were seen as retrogressive, diversionary and even pro-British. Liberal historiographical representations spoke of caste movements as forming "an alternative stream of politics...not nationalist or anti-imperialist but with loyalist pro-colonial tendencies" (Chandra 1989, 28). The only way in which such movements could begin to be accommodated within the nationalist question was to see them as partly addressing questions of economic backwardness among the lower caste workers and peasants of the land.

The vigour and expanse of anti-caste and dalit movements across the subcontinent from the early years of this century have been extensively documented by historians and social anthropologists. Phule and Ambedkar in the West, Periyar and Narayanaswamy Guru in the South and Achhutanand and Mangoo Ram in the North were all instrumental in foregrounding the issue of caste oppression in the very decades in which emerged debates about anti-imperialism, nationalism and national identity. It is well known that these leaders of the anti-caste movement tied their agenda of socio-cultural change to fundamental economic questions relating to the exploitation of lower caste workers, peasants and landless labourers. Ambedkar, for instance, founded the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in 1936, a political organization that projected itself as a front for workers and peasants. In a programme published in India's best-known national daily, The Times of

India, the party described itself as a “labour organization” whose main aim was “to advance the welfare of the labouring classes”^{iv}. While it endorsed the predominance of the State’s role in controlling and managing the nation’s economy, its main focus was on addressing the cause of the unemployed and the landless. The party’s role in leading the struggle against *khoti* landlordism has been well documented both in the weekly published by Ambedkar since 1930, the *Janata*, and in other studies of the Ambedkarite movement in Maharashtra. Among the other objectives of the ILP, the following were significant. They included “measures to save peasants from the clutches of money lenders, put[ting] up a strong opposition to land revenue...campaign[ing] for legislation for a more equitable system of tax as well as the establishment of land mortgage banks and agricultural producers’ co-operatives and marketing societies” (Omvedt 1994, 193). Unlike other political parties that aimed to address the cause of the labouring masses by allying themselves with the hegemonic Indian National Congress, Ambedkar’s ILP set itself up in opposition to the Congress. The reason given was that the INC and its left allies were insensitive to caste and other social inequalities that continued to dog the daily life of the workers and peasants. As Ambedkar, attacking the Nehruvian brand of socialism, wrote in the *Janata*:

The Panditji’s claim is that “there is no other way than socialism for the Indian people to become free of their poverty, excessive unemployment, degradation and slavery”. You can take from any principle of socialism that a nation cannot be really free without destroying economic inequality – but is this possible for the Congress of which Pandit Nehru is president? *The Indian working class is completely blinded by social and religious inequality, and without removing these the class will never be organized*^v (emphasis added).

The other left-based political allies of the INC had been averse to bringing in questions of caste and religion into class struggle. But for a while in the mid and late thirties,

Ambedkar's and ILP's commitment to the cause of the proletariat masses disarmed them. On 7 November 1938, they organized a joint strike with the ILP in Bombay to oppose the Industrial Disputes Bill that the Congress ministry had introduced in the Bombay Legislative Assembly on 2 September 1938. The Congress was beginning to worry about the militant working class protests that grew more and more vigorous in the nineteen-thirties, and introduced the Bill as a measure to curb the growing radicalism of the working class movement. It felt that the aggressive tactics of the latter would weaken the common ground it had forged with the Congress against the might of the British Empire. Ambedkar dubbed the Bill as the "Workers' Civil Liberties Suspension Act" and claimed that he would go all out to oppose the "bad, bloody and brutal Bill"^{vi}. It was his ILP that organized the strike of 7 November in Bombay in which for the first and the last time he shared the podium with the communist veteran S.A. Dange. But the honeymoon with the Indian left did not last long. The main reason was the inability and unwillingness of these left based parties to give any prominence to issues of caste and untouchability. Theirs was an instrumentalist reading of the role of caste in class struggle and nationalist politics. They were happy to welcome the dalits into their fold, but only as toilers who could not make much of their caste identity once they were part of the class struggle. Thus, for instance, Ambedkar's mobilization of the dalit workers in the Bombay strike was read by one member of the Communist Party of India (CPI) in additive terms as the involvement of those sections of the populace in both the nationalist movement and the working class movement that had hitherto refrained from such participation:

Some 15000 untouchable workers who for years stood aloof from the workers and anti-imperialist struggle were for the first time listening to the inspiring message of the joint struggle against imperialism^{vii}.

The fact that it was precisely the disabilities generated by the deeply exploitative caste hierarchies that had prevented the untouchable workers from participating in the anti-imperialist and workers movements at the national level was something that this member from the CPI cadre could not begin to admit. For that would demand of him a more challenging way of looking at the phenomenon of class-based struggle in the Indian context than what he had absorbed from the Marxist orthodoxies of his time. As Aditya Nigam has noted recently, by the time of its high noon, the Indian communist movement had unreflexively internalized the dictates of the Comintern and looked to it and the Soviet Union for both “its ideological-theoretical nourishment and organizational co-ordination”(41). This involved taking on board not just the apparatus of post-Enlightenment Rationalism with its concomitant distaste for pre-capitalist social formations such as those based on caste and religion, but also a rigid organizational grid that toed the Comintern and eventually Stalinist line. Nigam cites two moments in the history of the Indian Communist movement that illustrate its subservience to the Comintern and Soviet style communism and its inability to adapt Marxism to the Indian situation.

The first relates to the manner in which M.N. Roy drew up the first Manifesto of the Indian Communist Party. It was drafted by Roy in Moscow with the help of Mikhail Borodin and was approved by Lenin and Stalin. That its distance from India was more than just geographical is apparent at every stage in the document. It characterized the Indian National Congress as a mob of “several thousand noisy, irresponsible students and a number of middle class intellectuals followed by an ignorant mob momentarily incited by fanaticism” and claimed that such a party could hardly begin to politically organize the masses for a fight against the imperial power. This was also the period of the Khilafat

movement, which Roy (in a gesture that shows how little he was in touch with the pulse of the people) claimed did precious little for the toiling masses. As he put it: “the object for which the Indian people will fight should not be looked for somewhere in the unknown regions of Mesopotamia or Arabia or Constantinople.”^{viii} The Indian people were shackled by both colonial rule and their pre-colonial allegiances to caste and religion, and the Congress was not about to free them from their bondage. The only solution lay in the hands of the Indian Communist Party which would help the workers and peasants to throw off the yoke of darkness, superstition and unfreedom and lead India to a future where all men would be free and equal.

In the second example cited by Nigam we see a rather pathetic attempt on the part of some Marxist leaders to cling to Comintern orthodoxy irrespective of whether it suited the Indian conditions. The event as narrated by Muzaffar Ahmad involved the renaming of the Labour Swaraj Party at its Krishnanagar session in 1926. The new name agreed upon was “The Bengal Peasants’ and Workers’ Party”. Ahmad notes that some of the delegates then present including himself would have preferred to use the term “Workers” at the start of the name, for it was a party committed to the primacy of class struggle. But because the peasants were in a majority in that session, Ahmad and others did not voice their disagreement. They however managed to get the name changed at a session held two years later. Nigam observes that it was fear of Comintern disapprobation and disciplinary action that lay behind Ahmad’s actions. For Ahmad knew that one of the reasons the communist veteran M.N. Roy was expelled from the Comintern was precisely because he went against the Comintern injunction of one party, one class – the Communist part for the working class – and argued that India needed “not merely a 2-class party but a multi-class party.”^{ix}

I have drawn on these two examples of the way the communist movement manifested itself in the Indian political domain only to suggest that it did not have the wherewithal to rethink the question of class struggle from the point of view of the dalit movement. The latter's engagement with the millennia-long pain of caste oppression could not be accommodated within the Indian communist movement's dogmatic acceptance of the *primacy* of class struggle. The untouchables were welcome into its fold but *first* as members of the working class. This political myopia had its theoretical counterpart in the mechanical, vulgar, economistic Marxist readings of caste that circulated around the same time in the intellectual and academic domain. The primary emphasis on class and economic subordination to holders of property relegated issues of caste to the level of the socio-religious, the ideological, the non-material. Scholars have noted that even Ambedkar adopted the mechanistic architectural framework of base and superstructure, except that in his quarrels with the Indian communists he sought to reverse it and argue for the importance of addressing the "superstructural" aspects of the framework *first*. Thus, in an article published in his own weekly, *Janata*, he wrote:

But the base is not the building. On the basis of the economic relations a building is erected of religious, social and political institutions. This building has just as much truth (reality) as the base. If we want to change the base, then first the building that has been constructed on it has to be knocked down. In the same way, if we want to change the economic relations of society, then first the existing social, political and other institutions will have to be destroyed.^x

There were at least two consequences of Ambedkar's acceptance of both this mechanistic model of base and superstructure and the socialistic assumption that behind all economic ills lay the idea of private ownership of property. The first was his inability to theorize about the *material* basis of caste itself. Thus, while he wrote extensively in the early decades of this century on the exploitative nature of imperialism and capitalist

accumulation^{xi}, such writing did not suggest ways in which such exploitation and accumulation were, in the Indian context, mediated by caste structures. The basis of caste for him was socio-religious and had to be addressed at the level of consciousness and ideology. This interestingly led him, as we shall see in a later chapter, to engage with dimensions of dalit dwelling that were not at every instance determined by capitalist modernity. But his mechanistic, vulgar Marxist approach to caste did little towards formulating an analysis of it in historical materialist terms. The second consequence of Ambedkar's attempt to separate class and caste analyses was his unabashed endorsement of state control of the means of production and an acceptance of the idea that heavy industrialization constituted the economic foundations of socialism. Not surprisingly what followed was an enthusiasm for the powers of modern science and technology and a rejection of decentred rural-based modes of alternative development. In the final analysis, there was very little to distinguish between the Ambedkarite and the Nehruvian models of development for modern India. There was no critique in the Ambedkarite model of economic development of the "degree to which a state-controlled heavy industry would be effectively a Brahmin and high-caste controlled economy" (Omvedt 1994, 230).

The Dalit Panther Movement in the seventies, which drew its primary inspiration from Ambedkar's attempts to bring the issue of untouchability to the forefront of the nationalist struggle, did not however share Ambedkar's vision of state control and capitalist development. This movement was more avowedly Marxist in its early phase and called for nothing short of a radical proletariat revolution. But it too could not break out of an economic determinism, and ended up reading the class-caste dualism in terms of the mechanical base-superstructure model that had characterized all previous materialist attempts to study caste. The primary emphasis of its prominent leaders on economic factors

of caste exploitation and their relegation of the cultural dimensions of untouchable identity to the domain of superstitious religious activity – their criticism, in other words, of Ambedkar’s Buddhist legacy – eventually led to that party being split along the class-caste divide, with Namdeo Dhasal’s faction committed to a proletariat revolution and Raja Dhale’s group committed to Ambedkar’s cultural project of fighting Hindu Brahmanical domination by seeking out a new identity for the dalits in the teachings of Gautama Buddha.^{xii}

Caste in Marxist Historiography

Marxism and its political and intellectual heritage have continued to have an impact on modes of narrating the story of India’s emergence as a nation. Marxist historians like Irfan Habib, for instance, insist on reading the nationalist movement in terms of a massive mobilization of energies from below. As he says, “It seems to me that there is now a general understanding that the national movement was a united front of all classes of the Indian people, the peasantry, other petty bourgeoisie and the working class, to the exclusion of the big landowners and princes” (1995,10). He laments the discounting of role of the left in most liberal accounts of Indian nationalist movement. After all, as he says, “the creation of the organized kisan movement and the trade unions was mainly the handiwork of the communists and their allies” (10). Marxist historiography in the hands of Habib, Kosambi and Sharma has in fact comprehensively and rigorously challenged most of the assumptions of hegemonic nationalist narratives of India’s past and of its emergence into modernity. In what follows, I examine its trajectory with specific reference to its articulations on caste.

The Marxists, like the secular nationalists, demystified “caste” as a category of social and historical analysis, and like the nationalists, debunked the orientalist construction of caste as India’s essence. At the same time, Marxist historians in India also castigated nationalist histories for positing India as an undivided, autonomous, glorious agent of its own history and for ignoring the heterogeneous, contestatory materialities that underpinned its evolution. What was the point of replacing “foreign bourgeois prejudices” with those of the “Indian bourgeoisie”, Kosambi asked in 1954.^{xiii} His diatribe against the nationalist historians is relentless. With an obvious jibe at Nehru’s corpus, he notes how “shallow” such prison-produced histories are. His attacks on dynastic histories are as relentless. For a Marxist, history can be only one thing: “...the development in chronological order of basic changes in the means and relations of production” (1985, 69). Every other history deals with “the superstructure, not with essentials. It doesn’t matter if king Tweedledum succeeded Tweedledee, or the reverse: but whether the production and use of iron was first developed under Dum or Dee is a problem of a totally different order of importance, which might then make it essential to determine which of the two came first” (69).

Situating Indian history within a transition, mode-of-production narrative, the Marxists generally relegated caste to the domain of the superstructure. Thus, its “existence and efficacy (were) to be understood as the ideological products of the specific pre-capitalist social formations that...made their appearance in Indian history” (Chatterjee 1993, 173). Take, for instance, the Marxist historical analysis of the evolution of Buddhism in sixth century B.C. That Buddhism was a significant historical moment in the narrative of caste is a fact that historians and anthropologists across ideological divides are in agreement about. While Dumont’s “idealistic” history accounted for the success of early Buddhism in terms of the latter’s more successful appeal to the idiom of “purity”, Marxists historians such as

Kosambi and R.S. Sharma pointed to the shift from pastoralism to agriculture and to the rise of towns and growth of commerce respectively, to account for the same.

Kosambi spoke of the efficacy of the Buddhist doctrine of *ahimsa* (non-violence), at a time when agriculture was beginning to gain ascendancy over pastoralism:

The new society had gone to agriculture, so that the slaughter of more and more animals at a growing number of sacrifices meant a much heavier drain upon producer and production. Not only was the number of cattle bred proportionately much less per head of population, but they were now privately owned by clans or families rather than tribes and more valuable to the agriculturist than to the herdsmen. That they were taken as before without compensation meant in effect a heavy tax upon the Vaishya class. Apart from having less to trade because of this tax, trade and production were both disturbed by the unceasing petty warfare. Even the most passive of...sects...repudiated the use of ritual sacrifice, while the most active like Jainism and Buddhism based themselves upon *ahimsa*, "non-killing", as strongly opposed to war as to ritual sacrifice (1956, 166-167).

Further, the Buddhist ethico-philosophical thought encapsulated in the eight-fold path, which included, among other principles, an emphasis on justice, truth and non-covetousness, is seen by Kosambi to correlate, at least in part, to an evolving concept of private property at the time.

Another Marxist historian, Irfan Habib, has argued that the Buddhist doctrine of *ahimsa* gained ascendancy because it provided a rationale to upper caste Aryans to subjugate food-gathering tribes (168). Studies by R.S. Sharma on the fourth caste category or the *shudras* in ancient India (1980) showed that the Buddhist philosophy of *ahimsa* and Buddha's injunction to monks to refrain from cultivation (because agricultural work destroyed lives by ploughing and watering fields) resulted in peasants being relegated to the *shudra varna*

or the lowest caste. In, thus, foregrounding the significance of the Buddhist period in the evolution of the caste system, such Marxist histories showed up the inadequacies of Dumontian and other idealistic accounts that claimed that the essence of caste lay in its Brahmanic ideals. How else could one account for the solidifying of caste structures at a time when Brahmanical Hinduism was being so vigorously challenged by Buddhism?

The inadequacies of the neo-Orientalist thesis of the Brahmanic essence of caste was also laid bare by another historiographical attempt to study, this time, medieval India through the Marxist grid. Irfan Habib has shown that caste structures in both rural and urban India remained relatively unchanged during the period of Muslim rule in India in spite of the fact that almost all Muslim rulers were hostile to the idol-worshipping Brahmin Hindus and that caste was an alien, intractable category to the Islamic legal system. What purpose did caste then serve in the Indo-Islamic economy and polity? Caste as a form of division of labour was intimately connected with "relations of production" (169). Caste labour, as Marx had shown, operated in two domains: the rural domain of natural economy and the urban domain of market economy. In the former, artists and menials belonging to particular castes were also servants of the village as a whole. Customary payments in kind or land allotments were made to them and commodity exchange was dispensed with. Such caste labour, hereditary in nature, "was of crucial importance in sustaining the self-sufficiency as well as the internal natural economy of the village. Such self-sufficiency not only isolated the village, but enlarged its capacity to deliver a large part of the surplus to the ruling class, since it did not need much extra produce to exchange for its own imports" (Habib, 171).

What happened when the surplus of caste labour entered the urban realm of market economy? It circulated as any other commodity. The wage costs could, however, be kept low due to the lowly caste status accorded to the artisans. As Habib says:

Their depressed status and lack of mobility must surely have helped to curtail the powers of resistance of the artisans and so keep the wage costs low (172)

These material benefits accruing from the caste system were quickly appreciated by the Muslim rulers and they had no problem endorsing caste structures, notwithstanding their religious repugnance towards idol-worshipping Brahmanic Hinduism.

A common strain in Marxist historiography from Kosambi to Habib is their progressivist stance that modernization and decisive class struggle will eventually erode caste structures and “relegate caste to history to which it properly belongs” (Habib, 179). After all, as Marx put it, caste was a decisive impediment to India’s progress. Kosambi himself repeatedly wrote that caste was destined to be a “negation of history, and therewith the negation of progress” (1985, 128). Another Marxist scholar of dalit political and social history, Gail Omvedt, while differing from the classical Marxists in crucial respects, emphasizes that the resolution of the caste issue *must* precede all other revolutionary movements in India. In other words, caste is an obstacle that must *first* be taken care of if India is to modernize itself.

Caste as Infrastructure in Omvedt

Omvedt differs from the classical Marxist historians in that she rejects the superstructure theory of caste. Following Godelier who formulated a trenchant Marxist critique of Louis Dumont, Omvedt situates caste firmly in the domain of the base and sees it functioning at

the level of the relations of production. She draws on Godelier's infrastructural argument that "each structure – social, kinship, political, etc. has its own content not reducible to any other and its own mode and time-scale of evolution" (1972, 92).^{xiv} She shows that in a fundamentally agrarian society like India, caste and material/economic factors have always been deeply intertwined. Thus, relegating the question of caste to the domain of the "social" or of pure "form", renders any traditional Marxist account of Indian history and society which locates "reality" in the class struggle not only historically inaccurate but also ideologically questionable:

Traditional Marxist analyses are...showing themselves as inadequate. The view that though there are class differences among the peasantry (rich, poor, landless, etc), these are non-antagonistic and that the main contradiction is between "peasants" as a group and landlords, has left the major communist parties tailing after the rural rich rather than building an independent political movement based on the rural toilers (Omvedt 1982,10).

In her major work on the dalit movement, Dalits and the Democratic Revolution (1994), Omvedt notes that most Marxist analyses of caste have been based on a narrow reading of economic exploitation in the sense that they have drawn on the foundational category of *class* as it has been conceptualized within the capitalist mode of production. Class in such conceptualization is defined in terms of *ownership of the means of production*, and class struggle in terms of the conflict between those who labour but do not own the means of production and those who do not toil but live and thrive on the expropriation of the surplus produced by the labour of the toiling masses. In such a reading where classes come into existence only in the capitalist "core" areas of factory production, there is no theoretical space to account for caste-based and other forms of economic exploitation that do not necessarily follow from the concept of *ownership* of the means of production. As Omvedt says:

Some owners are exploited (eg. small peasants); some non-owners exploit (eg. controllers of state property in societies described as “socialist”; lords and upper castes in certain feudal societies). Proletarian husbands may benefit from the exploitation of their wives’ unpaid labour. Moreover, many ecologists would argue that nature itself can be “exploited” in the double sense that resources from nature incorporated into the accumulation cycle increase the accumulation of capital, and that this has a destructive effect on the ecologies of regions that provide such resources (55).

Omvedt is also against theoretical attempts that extend the analytical reach of class to include every other form of economic exploitation. This, for instance, is the stance of those who, like Sharad Patil^{xv}, argue that caste is class in a South Asian form. In such readings caste is read non-ideologically and caste struggle or *jati sangharsh* is seen as a form of class struggle. Such attempts, Omvedt maintains, continues to assert the hegemony of the analytic of class. Omvedt would rather maintain the narrowness of the classical Marxist theorizing of class and argue that as an analytic category it cannot begin to encompass all forms of economic exploitation, such as those based on patriarchy or caste-hierarchy for instance. These latter are not merely superstructural or ideological, but have a pronounced economic dimension as well. The forms of exploitation they assume contribute to the accumulation of capital, but *they are not determined at every instance by the sphere of surplus value and capitalist production in the narrow sense, that is, by manufacturing and processes of wage labour*. One could argue from here that together they constitute the *outside* that inheres in the categories of class and capital. Omvedt, of course, does not argue for such a deconstructive reading of capital and class. Rather, she puts forward a historicist reading of caste-based forms of economic exploitation as those that had a *prior* existence “outside the spheres of capitalist production” and which were *subsequently* brought into the domain of capital (57). Her caste as infrastructure thesis is based squarely on such historicism.^{xvi} From this position she formulates her theory of liberation of caste-

class oppression by arguing that in the South Asian context one could not talk of class struggle in additive terms – that is in terms of adding the issues of caste, gender and ecology to the primacy of class – but only in terms that recognized that the very term “class struggle” had no meaning unless it took the form of community-based struggles, be they based on caste, gender or religion.

It is not a coincidence that of the many theories put forward to account for the genealogy of caste Omvedt endorses the materialist account put forward by Morton Klass in his book, Caste: The Emergence of the South Asian Social System (1980). Klass places the origin of caste at the very beginning of Indian class society. According to Klass the pre-Aryan tribal societies were inherently egalitarian. Gradually, with the improvement in the means of production such societies started generating economic surplus; such surplus led to inequality in economic status among the various tribal groups. This economic inequality then evolved into a very specific form of social stratification that we now know as caste. Caste has since coexisted with “several *different* modes of production, from the very earliest ones which we would define essentially as tributary modes through the feudal period up to the present when capitalism has come to dominate” (Omvedt 1982, 12, emphasis original).

Omvedt’s argument that caste and class in India have always meshed together derives its strength from her invocation of Marx’s thesis that the “economic” began to be seen as a separate phenomenon, distinct from the political and the social, *only* with the advent of the capitalist mode of production. In pre-capitalist Indian society, as she says, “unpaid surplus labour was pumped out of direct producers via a system that was itself defined and organized in terms of caste. While the sub-castes were a basic unit of the kinship system,

the *jati* itself was a class phenomenon and was a basic unit of the division of labour...caste structured the very nature and existence of the exploiting and exploited sections...it was impossible to speak of a 'caste system' and a 'class structure' as separate *concrete* phenomenon" (1982, 14, emphasis original).^{xvii}

With the advent of the British, caste and class were formally separated, not only because the indigenous social and political formations were completely subordinated to the demands of capitalism in Britain, but also because "the British abolished the pre-existing purely caste-defined access to land and other goods and imposed legal relationships of land ownership and tenancy backed by courts operating on a definition of legal private property" (Omvedt 1982, 19). Further, as other Marxist scholars have pointed out, the British recruited Indians to work in mines, on plantations, in factories and even at bureaucratic levels, but never on the basis of caste. Technically then caste was no barrier to participation in British capitalist ventures. Omvedt is, however, at pains to emphasize that most of the opportunities provided by the British, especially at the slightly upper echelons of government administration and corporate management, hardly ever percolated down to the oppressed castes. It was invariably the upper castes with their pre-existing advantages of power, wealth, education and status that made the most of these opportunities. The lower castes either continued as rural toilers or got sucked into new modes of oppression in the form of mine, factory or plantation workers. In other words, caste and class continued to determine each other. In the agrarian sector, while British land reforms "constituted for the first time classes of 'landlords', 'tenants' and 'labourers' as legal-economic entities formally separate from the caste system" (Omvedt, 1982, 20), the landlords were invariably drawn from those with feudal power in pre-capitalist India, that is, from the ranks of the highest castes. And the two remaining categories, the tenants and the

labourers, were constituted from a plethora of castes with diverse hierarchical positions. The only difference between pre-capitalist and capitalist British India was that, in the former, class was *identified* with caste, while in the latter caste and class were *correlated* but did not necessarily go together.

One is reminded here of Gramsci's resistance to treating "labour" as a homogeneous category. As he says, capitalism works *through* and *because* of the culturally specific character of labour power. This observation has had enormous implications for both gender and race studies. It shows how Marxism as a grand narrative with its bourgeois-proletariat dichotomy, is invariably sliced through with "difference", with other intersecting relationships of power and dominance. In this context, it is interesting to note Omvedt's objection to the classical Marxist model of agrarian revolution in India that saw the crux of the anti-feudal struggle in the abolition of landlordism. She sees this model as patently inadequate for it does not involve a "thorough attack on the caste system itself and a transformation of relations of production *within* the village and *among* the toiling masses in a way that would assure that artisans or village servants and labourers as well as kisans could gain basic rights to land and its produce" (1982, 19, emphasis original). Her argument is substantiated by the fact that most anti-feudal movements in postcolonial India have tended to ignore the question of caste. This is because these movements have been dominated by upper and middle level peasantry who have been unwilling to upset the caste *status quo* by incorporating dalit and *adivasi* labourers into their struggle. In fact, as Omvedt says, the present enemies of the dalits are "no longer Brahmins, Rajputs, Deshmukhs, Vellalas or high caste landlords, but (are) most often the middle castes, the new rich farmers, those who were once middle peasants and tenants fighting against landlords, and who now still call themselves *bahujan samaj*, *kisan*, *shetkari*. Those who

were once allies of the dalits in the anti-feudal struggle now appear to be the main enemy” (1982, 26). Anti-caste movements, on the other hand, have invariably been anti-feudal. One thinks of the *Satyashodhak Samaj* Movement of Jyotirao Phule and Periyar’s Self-Respect Movement in Tamil Nadu. Both these were as fiercely anti-Brahmanic as they were anti-landlordism. Again, the Ambedkar-led dalit movement in the nineteen-thirties very consciously mobilized the *shudras* and *ati-shudras* as well as workers and rural labourers to erect a formidable subaltern front to challenge the colonial bourgeois state.

Omvedt takes issue with the disinclination on the part of the left-led workers’ and peasants’ movements to take cognizance of caste in their negotiations with the postcolonial bourgeois Indian nation-state. To separate the proletariat revolution from the anti-caste revolution is, according to her, dangerous because not only does caste continue to determine who the toiling masses are going to be, but it also has become the primary means of creating factions among the proletariat. Omvedt calls upon the Marxists not only to reinforce the dalit movement, but also suspend for the time being their own exclusive focus on class action.

Drawing on the early work of post-Marxist theorists of democracy such as Laclau and Mouffe, she argues that the dalit and other radical anti-caste movements can be cast in the mould of a democratic revolution. She invokes Laclau and Mouffe’s argument in their Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (1989), that any form of subordination does not naturally carry with it an antagonistic dimension. Such a dimension emerges – that is, *subordination* begins to be seen as *oppression* by serfs, slaves, dalits, and other subordinated groups – only when a discourse that talks of “rights inherent to every human being” is hegemonic in the polis. Laclau and Mouffe consider democracy as such a discourse and argue that it is

the language in which is articulated the political struggles of our times. As Laclau puts it, “To affirm the rights of the people to their self-determination presupposes the legitimacy of the discourses of equality in the international sphere” (1990, 187). He goes on to add, however, that these discourses are not “‘natural’ discourses, but [that] they have conditions of possibility and a specific genesis” and more importantly that a “society is democratic, not insofar as it postulates the validity of a certain type of social organization and of certain values vis-à-vis others, but insofar as it refuses to give its own organization and its own values the status of a *fundamentum inconcussum*” (187). Omvedt does not carry her reading of Laclau and Mouffe far enough to talk about this *radical* dimension of their argument about the hegemony of democratic discourse. In other words, she does not take on board their post-foundationalist reading of democracy as a form of revolution in which there are no sustainable universals and rules true for all time, and in which the particularity of the experiences of the new social subjects – the dalits, feminists, ecologists – resists being subsumed under the category of the universal Enlightenment subject. The democratic polis is a field of antagonisms and not consensus and no single subject position can begin to talk for the social whole. It is in that sense that Laclau talks of the *impossibility* of the social. This does not mean that universals are thrown overboard. It just means that these universals are adopted with the awareness that at any one time they cannot begin to speak for all subject positions within the polis. In that sense they are inherently *incomplete*. Anthony Cascardi in his book Consequences of Enlightenment sums up Laclau’s position very well:

On Laclau’s account, the groups responsible for this new revolution [democracy] may have taken up positions analogous to that of the “universal” Enlightenment subject, but their importance in determining the course of history in fact derives from what the notion of the “universal subject” leaves out – the contingency of the particular understood as a

function of the inability of such democratic ideals as “equality” and “autonomy” to embrace the whole (181).

Omvedt, in her emphases both on the foundational status of caste in Indian social and economic organization, and on the centrality of anti-caste movements in the evolving democratic imaginary of the sub-continent, does not subscribe to such a radical reading of the universal and the particular where political ideology and subjectivity is concerned. She does, of course, talk of the inadequacies of a liberal democratic constitutional framework in tackling identity issues in the Indian sub-continent. But this does not lead her to talk of the contingency of either political universals or particular subject-positions. For her the dalit represents the *authentic* face of India’s democratic revolution and the dalit movement its starting point.

Discrete Castes: Critique of Hierarchy and Infrastructure

Omvedt’s inclination to accord primacy to the dalit movement has had many detractors from among other Marxist scholars. Most of the charges relate to what her critics call her inadequate theorizing of the interconnection between class and caste in colonial and post-colonial India. According to her, the separation between the economic and the social, that is the separation between “class” and “caste”, in Indian society, was heralded by the arrival of the British and the capitalist mode of production they imposed on India. In pre-capitalist India, as we have seen, caste *was* the basis of class. Omvedt’s claim that caste continued to impinge on class in colonial India, and that it continues to inform in a crucial way relations of production in post-colonial India, has however been based on a pragmatic empiricism, rather than on theoretical rigour. Her fieldwork experiences “show” her that caste continues to determine economic status, at least in rural India, that it is *infrastructural*. But they are unable to provide her with a model of class-caste relations that would do away

with the dualism of the economic and the social. Drawing up such a model would mean disavowing the fact that the conditions of capitalist production in India were produced by the “*external* intervention of colonialism” (Chatterjee 1989, 12, emphasis original). One can in other words, assert that caste, religion, kinship, etc, are infrastructural in twentieth century India only by disavowing the reality of capitalist development and the creation of classes which colonization brought in its wake. Thus, as Chatterjee says:

To the extent that the new conditions of capitalist production are treated as external, a *duality* between the two structures of class and caste become unavoidable (12, emphasis original).

Another and more serious charge against Omvedt is that her position is eventually a reiteration of the culturological thesis of Louis Dumont who asserts the primacy of caste in Indian social relations. In drawing on Godelier’s infrastructural thesis of caste, she cannot but escape his argument about the *autonomy* of the domain of caste relations. For this is precisely the argument Godelier uses in order to counter reductionist Marxist readings of caste. And his is not the Althusserian notion of relative autonomy. In such a reading then, *the autonomy of caste in the modern context of capitalist relations of production can only be asserted in culturological terms*. There thus remains no theoretical ground on the basis of which one could distinguish Godelier’s anti-reductionist reading of caste – which also constitutes Omvedt’s reading – from Dumont’s idealist account of the same. Little wonder then that the Indian sociologist Dipankar Gupta writes:

It is...no coincidence that Dumont and Omvedt come to similar conclusions regarding political praxis vis-à-vis the caste system (1981, 2094).

That is, both Dumont and Omvedt assert the primacy of “caste action” in revolutionizing social relations in India. There is very little distinction between the implications of Omvedt’s “caste as infrastructure” thesis and those of Dumont’s “caste as essence” thesis.

One common charge against Marxist theorization of caste in general has been that it has not radically reformulated the conceptual framework within which caste has been studied in orientalist and nationalist discourses. One example is the Marxists’ uncritical acceptance of the Dumontian notion of “hierarchy” as the defining principle of caste structure. That to do so is to accept the ideology of the privileged castes is something that Marxist analysts have ignored. This is in spite of the fact that it was Marxism which first formulated the notion that ideology masked naked power. As Dipankar Gupta says, “the *rule* of caste (i.e. hierarchy) is only obeyed when it is accompanied by the *rule* of power” (1984, 1957, emphasis original). In other words, it is due to the authority of the hegemonic Brahmin caste that “hierarchy” is established as the governing principle of the caste structure. This power or authority of the Brahmin caste is, of course, cloaked in the process of naturalizing caste structures as graded. Gupta’s ethnographic research into other castes demonstrates that each caste has its own idiosyncratic articulation of caste ideology. Castes, thus, exist not in a continuous hierarchy but as *discrete categories or classes*. The difference between the two is described by Gupta as follows:

Continuous hierarchies are built around a single criterion which is shared to a greater or lesser extent by all those who occupy the hierarchy. Other factors need not be adduced to it to justify the ranking. Discrete categories are different. A proletariat is not merely not a bourgeois, but is made up of singular defining characteristic or characteristics not shared by the bourgeois. A Bengali is not simply a non-Maharashtrian, or a Bania is not simply a non-Brahmin. So the criteria that separate discrete categories or classes cannot simply be understood by the presence or absence of any one criterion or attribute (1957).

Gupta holds that the moment one shifts one's gaze from the Brahmins to the subaltern castes, the notion of hierarchy undergoes a rough tumble, as does Dumont's conception of the grading system based on "purity" and "pollution" (2003). Each caste is shown to have its own myth of origin and in each case the myth comprehensibly counters the Brahman's claim to be the highest caste.

Gupta gives us a few examples of such myths from the untouchable and lower castes of north and south India. He notes that the occupational specifications of these castes become key motifs in such mythic narratives. Thus, the leather workers from the traditionally untouchable *Chamar* caste reject the *Puranic* account of their descent from the coupling of a boatman and a *chandala* woman and claim that their original ancestor was the youngest of four Brahmin brothers who attempted to rescue a cow from drowning in the river. He was not successful in saving the cow and was ordered by his older brothers to remove the cow's carcass from the river. He was then excommunicated from his caste for touching a dead cow. The *Kammalan* caste, consisting of artisans from five categories – goldsmiths, blacksmiths, braziers, stonemasons and carpenters – claim descent from Vishwakarma, the divine architect of the *Puranas*, and consider themselves equal to Brahmins. In most *Kayasth* myths of origin, the story of Parashuram, the Brahmin persecutor of *Kshatriyas*, is invoked to suggest that many warrior upper castes sought refuge in lower caste status to escape Parashuram's wrath. Each of these myths is characterized by a large measure of hostility toward the Brahmins. Apart from these myths of origin, most lower caste and untouchable communities have rituals and customs peculiar to themselves and those that pointedly ignore the Brahmins. One example is the appointment of priests from their own castes to perform ceremonial and sacrificial rituals. This is seen most prominently among

the *Lingayats* of Mysore, the *Gauras* of Orissa and the *Mauliks* of Bengal (2005). As Gupta notes, the supreme status of the Brahmin appears more often than not as “fiction” when one does an ethnographic reading of lower and untouchable caste practices.

Gupta’s is perhaps the first attempt to theorize caste from a subaltern perspective. But unlike some of the historians from the Subaltern Studies collective, he is not “radical” enough. Unlike the latter, he does not “refuse the privileged themes of global capitalist modernization and focus instead off-centre on what those themes exclude: histories of the subordinate whose identity, like all identity, resides in difference” (O’Hanlan and Washbrook, 143). There is no epistemological rethinking in his work on the limitations of Marxist categories when applied to the theorization of caste, a social practice peculiar to South Asia. His critique of Dumont’s formulation of continuous hierarchies is, as we saw, based on the notion that it is really the *power* of the Brahmins that enables the circulation of the thesis that hierarchy is the foundation of the caste structure. Gupta, however, reads *power* in purely secular, materialist terms as advantage gained from a *superior economic and political* status. Or as he puts it in another way, if the lower castes “do abide on the ground by the ranking of purity inflicted on them by the ideology of some other castes then it is because of the conjoint working of the principles of economics and/or politics, both of which are amenable to hierarchical ranking” (1957). Such a reading does nothing towards theorizing the non-secular dimension of caste power, theorizing it in ways, in other words, that bring to the fore those aspects that resist subsumption under the secular categories of capitalist modernity. One is here not arguing for caste’s *autonomy* from such categories. One is merely suggesting that every dimension of caste practice does not lend itself to being read transparently under the gaze of capital. In deconstructive terms, one could say that caste is the *difference within* capital. This would constitute a post-foundationalist

reading of both capital and caste, and it is precisely such a reading that is attempted, as we shall see in the following chapter, by some historians and social scientists belonging to the Subaltern Studies collective.

ⁱ Cited in Seth, 89.

ⁱⁱ Cited in Nigam, 39.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Partha Chatterjee's "The Moment of Arrival" in Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World (1986) and Sanjay Seth's "Marxism, Nationalism and the Pursuit of Modernity" in Marxist Theory and Nationalist Politics (1995).

^{iv} Independent Labour Party: Its Foundations and Its Aims, (Reprinted from The Times of India, 15 August, 1936, ILP publication No. 1 of 1937), 3

^v Janata, 18 May, 1937.

^{vi} See Omvedt, 1994, 198-201 for more details.

^{vii} S.S Mirajkar, cited in Omvedt, 200.

^{viii} All quotations from the "Manifesto" cited in Nigam, 41.

^{ix} Cited in Nigam, 42.

^x See Omvedt 1994, 228.

^{xi} See his monographs "The Problem of the Rupee" and "The Evolution of Provincial Finance", in Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. VI, (Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1989).

^{xii} For a detailed account of the Dalit Panther Movement see Lata Murugkar, Dalit Panther movement in Maharashtra: A Sociological Appraisal, (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1991).

^{xiii} Cited in Kosambi, 1985, 67

^{xiv} Maurice Godelier, Rationality and Irrationality in Economics, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972).

^{xv} See his Dasa-Shudra Slavery, Vol. I, (Delhi: Allied Publishers 1980), Volume II, (Pune: Sugawa Publications, 1990).

^{xvi} A deconstructive reading of Marxist categories would have enabled her to see "caste" as difference *within* capital.

^{xvii} Omvedt's reference to the sub-castes and the *jatis* derives from the work of early social anthropologists like Irawati Karve who said that the basic unit of the caste system was not so much the *jati* or caste as the sub-caste or *potjati*. The latter operated as close kinship groups or "marriage circles", while the former, in pre-capitalist times, "had a concrete social existence as the basic unit of the social division of labour" (Omvedt 1982, 12).

CHAPTER FIVE

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF REVENGE CASTE AND POST-ORIENTALISM

For that man be delivered from revenge, that is for me the bridge to the highest hope and a rainbow after many storms.

Friedrich Nietzsche.

Affirmation, Not *Ressentiment*

One fairly obvious realization that emerges from the above readings of Orientalist, Nationalist and Marxist modes of imagining India is their deep and unquestioning investment in the vision of modernity. For the orientalist, Indian society mired in a few irreducible pre-modern essences such as caste and religion, was unmitigatedly opposed to an already modern Europe. To the nationalist, intent on recovering India's pride as a civilization and as a newly emergent nation, the first task was to counter pejorative orientalist stereotypes. But he could only do so by basing his critique on the epistemological template that informed the discourse of modernity itself. Thus, we saw that the nationalist historians were at pains to assert the *political* dynamism of ancient India and that, in the final analysis, the nationalist question was "resolved" by encapsulating it within a statist ideology articulated in terms of a rationalist politics. India in this scheme of things could finally take its place in the global march toward modernity. The Marxist intervention in this narrative was significant for it undercut the celebratory dimension of nationalist thought by showing that the latter obscured the interplay of capitalist forces with colonial

modernity. But in attempting to craft a narrative of the nation from a Marxist point of view, Marxist historians could not but make the narrative of capital *foundational* to their accounts. They could not help taking aboard Marx's four-fold stagist account of the evolution of European society, from primitive communism to slavery to feudalism to capitalism, and in the process read as *discrepant* all traces in Indian society that could not be accommodated into this scheme. For instance, Kosambi read the caste system as an *arresting* or *negation* of history (1985, 128) for, in his analysis, it prevented India from developing slavery of the Graeco-Roman variety (81- 85) that formed the basis of Marx's theorization. There was no space in his analysis to question the very historiographical assumptions of Marx himself, to show what these assumptions sought to occlude. That is why, as has so often been said, Marxist historians of non-European and especially Third World societies can read the history of capitalism in these societies only in terms of an *incompleteness* or *lack*. These societies are, perennially, only ever "catching up" with the modern capitalist West. Orientalism as an epistemological template functions more efficaciously than ever in such readings.

What, then, would a post-orientalist gesture connote? Certainly not a reversal of the binary, and a nativist/indigenist claim of being as "good" or as "worthy" as "them". Didn't Nietzsche say that the will that wills the dialectic is that of the slave that can only *react* and not *affirm*? Further, as we discussed in chapter one, this stance is no longer historically available to us. We cannot *not* engage with European knowledge formations. We cannot afford to throw overboard the tropes of nation, capital, modern, citizen, rights, secular, *et al*, that now configure narratives of cultures and polities around the globe. But we can certainly disturb their claims to speak for every aspect of human experience, and of being *foundational*. We can do this, however, not by showing that there are narratives

exceptional to the ones these tropes attempt to mark – for that would mean reaffirming the transparent universality of the latter – but by making visible those traces that these tropes have covered over in the *first* instance so as to enable their own staging as universal and foundational. To that extent many of the strategies of the postcolonial new humanists discussed in chapter one could figure as post-orientalist. Whether one renders the foundational tropes of western modernity “uncanny”, or one transacts “catachrestically” with them, or one attempts to “provincialize” them, all these strategies have one thing in common. They all attempt to mark those sites, those moments, those histories, on the occlusion of which the discourse of European modernity could fashion itself as universal and foundational.

A post-orientalist reading strategy can produce interesting ripples on the assured surface of foundational discourses. One thinks, for instance, of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s probe into working-class history (1989) through his critical foregrounding of the question of “culture” that inhabits the category of “capital”. It is a question that is not often addressed in attempting to study Third World societies from a Marxist perspective, and even when it is, the foundational status of capital is not disturbed, for the differences are invariably treated as aberrational or exceptional and, in the process, subsumed under the logic of capital. Marx, as Chakrabarty says, based his narrative of capital-labour relations on a very specific reading of culture – a culture that had a fully evolved bourgeois public sphere and where bourgeois notions of equality and individuality were very much part of the consciousness of the working-class. The society of England at the time of the Industrial Revolution provided Marx with an instance of such culture. What happens when Marx’s theorization is projected on to analyses of working-class consciousness in cultures where bourgeois ideals are not hegemonic, as in India, for instance? That is the starting point of Chakrabarty’s

thesis, and one that is well nigh impossible to *critically* address unless one is first willing to forego the assurance that comes from granting an axiomatic/foundational status to the precepts of Marxian political economy. He notes that Marxist historians in India are invariably economistic in their analysis of working-class consciousness, attributing “inequalities and conflicts handed down from our past” to “the economic ailments of the country – underdevelopment, unequal distribution of wealth, (neo) imperialist domination” (xii-xiii). Such economism invariably subsumes the workers’ consciousness to the logic of capital. As Chakrabarty says, “The ties of kinship, religion, language, or race were, of course, of much economic and material utility to the jute worker. But to see in this ‘utility’ the workers’ *reason* for valuing and retaining these bonds is to invest the jute worker with a bourgeois rationality, since it is only in such a system of rationality that the ‘economic utility’ of an action (or an object, relationship, institution, etc.) defines its reasonableness” (212, emphasis original). There is no attempt on the part of liberal nationalist or Marxist accounts to develop a non-reductionist reading of working-class culture, a reading that would mark sites where capital does not speak and where is rendered visible its discursivity as a foundational category. This is precisely the reading that Chakrabarty undertakes in Rethinking Working Class History.

Another instance of a post-Orientalist project is Subaltern Studies. More than a decade ago, Robert Young, in his White Mythologies: Writing History and the West, wrote that one of the primary thrusts of postcolonial theory as it was then shaping up in the work of its principal practitioners, Said, Spivak and Bhabha, was towards inaugurating a “new logics of historical writing” (175). History in the western philosophical trajectory has perpetrated what Levinas has called the “imperialism of the Same”. It has worked as a totalitarian project to subsume alterity or otherness in the ruse of an ideal, either Reason or Progress.

From the time of Hegel, History has moved westwards, violating, appropriating, erasing on its way, alternative accounts, experiences and identities. However, since World War II, continental philosophers from those belonging to the Frankfurt School to Foucault have in their own ways critiqued the Hegelian framework as also the positivist Rankean model of History. Such critiques with their deep investment in notions of interpretation and representation (as against retrieval of “facts” and “truths”), discontinuity, disjuncture, disruption (as against notions of the originary and the continuous), and the fragmentary (as against holistic models and grand narratives), provided both the inspiration and the groundwork for postcolonial configurations of history.

Inhering in such configurations was a deep suspicion of Enlightenment rationality and its conceptual apparatus that was borrowed wholesale by the newly liberated colonies of the Third World. The enormous stakes such politically liberated ex-colonies put into notions of “Nation”, “State”, “Citizenship” “Development” “Rights”, in short, in the whole apparatus of modernity and modernization, camouflaged not only the hegemony of the indigenous elite, but also this elite’s experiential distance and difference (indifference?) both from the modes of consciousness and the material conditions of the non-elite groups or subalterns. It is this awareness both of the non-recognition or disavowal of the subaltern domain as a legitimate autonomous entity in the discourse of Third World nationalism and the attempt by such nationalism to direct its “progressive” programmatic towards subaltern groups it considers “less developed” that forms the primary thrust of postcolonial historiography. Such historiography’s critique of modernity and of Eurocentric discourse in general is not, however, embedded in a nativist rhetoric that demands an abjuration of the West. Rather, to paraphrase Gayatri Spivak, it is a critique of a discursive space that one cannot not inhabit. Or in the words of Gyan Prakash, such critiques “seek(s) to undo the Eurocentrism

produced by the institution of the West's trajectory, its appropriation of the other as History. It does so however with the acute realization that its critical apparatus does not enjoy a panoptic distance from colonial history but exists as an aftermath, as an after – after being worked over by colonialism” (1994, 1475).

Such historiography has had one of its most celebrated manifestations in the form of the Subaltern Studies (henceforth as SS) project in South Asia. To the extent that this project abjures the practice of grounding Indian history in essential categories such as “nation” or “class”, and instead deploys the category of the “subaltern” to connote “the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (Guha 1982, 1), it signals a shift towards a greater awareness of the discursivity and contingency of the category designated as the “nation”. In making the question of power and domination central to its inquiry, it also brings to the foreground the very limits of accepted historiographical practice in relation to the Third World. In that sense the “subaltern” is not merely the empirical human materially exploited by dominant groups. It also serves as a trope to rethink the discipline of history itself, as a figuration that addresses the gaps and elisions in dominant discourse. As Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it:

Subaltern histories are constructed within a particular kind of historicized memory, one that remembers history itself as a violation, an imperious code that accompanied the civilizing process that the European enlightenment inaugurated in the eighteenth century as a world historical task... The subaltern ...is not the empirical peasant or tribal in any straightforward sense that a populist programme of history-writing may want to imagine. The figure of the subaltern is necessarily mediated by problems of representation (1993, 427).

To put it briefly, *SS*, in its more self-reflexive moments, does “history from below” at the same time as it deconstructs the very notion of “doing history” itself, for in the latter it sees figured an image of the non-West that is relentlessly aberrational in the relation to the normative West.

Much has been written on the multi-dimensionality of this project and its origins in a disillusionment both with the functioning of the postcolonial Indian nation-state and with the trajectories of history-writing in the nationalist and Marxist historiographical traditions in South Asia. The first volume of *SS* under the editorship of Ranajit Guha appeared in 1982, just five years after the lifting of political emergency clamped on the Indian nation by Indira Gandhi, a dictator masquerading in the garb of a politically elected leader of the masses. The first and so far the only instance of a totalitarian scheme of things in India, the “Emergency” as an event showed up the dark underside of a political ideology that had enormous stakes in statism and the project of capitalist modernity. Its clampdown on the varied ideological voices opposing the authority of the state and its masking of its own repression by hypocritical populist agenda, showed up the fragile foundations of Indian democratic institutions. One message was amply clear: the nation-state did not represent the interest of the masses. Its welfare agenda was in tatters, and power and agency made the rounds of money and patronage.

In the academic domain it appeared to radical historians increasingly untenable, in the face of the crisis surrounding the Indian nation-state, to continue writing Indian history from a nationalist perspective. Meanwhile, Marxist historiography, while it fractured the homogeneous gaze of the nationalist historians by showing up the varied and contingent materialities that constituted the Indian nation-state, was nevertheless deep in its

commitment to the project of modernization. To that extent it colluded with the “progressivist” vision of the Indian nation-state and itself invested heavily in a “rational” and “developmental” vision. The subaltern, be it the lower castes or the tribals, had to be hauled up from their “pre-modern”, “pre-capitalist” stupor and be made to partake in the benefits of modernization. In the process, caste, religion and other obsolete and anomalous institutions of identity-formation would either fall naturally by the wayside or would by a process of enabling violence be consciously discarded. Such a teleology, as Rosalind O’Hanlon put it, “emptie(d) subaltern movements of their specific types of consciousness and practice” (1988,193). It was at such a conjuncture of events, political and academic, that the SS project originated. The historians who contributed to its conception all worked within a Marxist tradition and were now on their way not so much to discarding Marxism, as many recent critiques of the project have claimed¹, as to show up the limits of its working in a non-western context. These historians do not bring aboard poststructuralism’s comprehensive rejection of Marxism. Rather, in their works is played out a “productive tension generated by the combination of Marxist and deconstructive approaches” (Prakash 1992, 168).

One of the early statements about the project’s reading of Marx is to be found in SSIV where Dipesh Chakrabarty invites the Indian detractors of the project to a dialogue concerning alternative readings of Marx:

We must begin by insisting that Marx’s thoughts were not without their tensions – generated among other things, by the contradictory pulls of Darwin and Hegel, for example – and have hence given rise to several, often different readings (1985, 369).

He then goes on to suggest that the concept “mode of production” does not necessarily connote an absolute divide between base and superstructure, for Marx himself used this

concept in varied ways in both his The German Ideology and Capital III. Chakrabarty's disgruntlement is with nationalist and classical Marxist accounts of Indian colonial history which, according to him, refuse a more nuanced reading of Marx and which consequently suffer from an overarching economism. There is an attempt in such histories to account for colonialism "as a system of domination designed primarily to help the *economic* exploitation of one society by another" (370, emphasis original). And when attempts are made to account for popular unrest or communal upheavals, the explanation is usually structured such that they always appear *determined* by "objective" historical/material forces. No attempt is made to accord a degree of autonomy to "popular consciousness", to see it as *not* being determined *at every instance* as an outcome of elite manipulation or colonial domination. It is this autonomy that is the focus of SS. SS does not refute the history of elite-subaltern interaction. Nor does it place subaltern consciousness "outside" history, in a pure uncontaminated domain. But it does consciously refuse "to subordinate the internal logic of 'consciousness' to the logic of so-called 'objective' or 'material' conditions" (Chakrabarty 373). This is not a complete abjuration of "class" or "capital" as is so often alleged. It is rather an attempt to show up the inadequacies of classical Marxism when the latter attempts to speak for histories that cannot be configured within the global history of capitalism. It is the alterities to such history that SS addresses. To that extent it brings aboard a "deconstructive political philosophy" that "increasingly ponders the intractable problem of a genuinely 'non-violative' relationships between the Self (the 'West') and the Other, and turns to questions of difference and ethics – questions made urgent by the current globalization of capital, information and technology" (Chakrabarty 1993, 423).

It is such reflexivity that is seen by historians like Sumit Sarkar as little more than a symptom of the hegemony of a paralyzing and unproductive postmodernism in academia. Sarkar in his book, Writing Social History, notes with deep concern the way in which radical social history as he knew it in the nineteen-sixties and the seventies has, through the global invasion of forms of postmodernism, been appropriated to Cultural Studies (vii). The result for him has been a loss of empirical rigour with respect to the material coordinates of exploitation and an increasing “elitism in structures of historical production and dissemination” (46). For Sarkar the avowed villain in the South Asian academic context is SS. There is in Sarkar’s critique an implicit interpretation of discourse as an “epiphenomenon of social and economic processes” (Patton 1987, 230), as something that is at a remove from *primary, material* realities. But as Foucault never failed to remind us, discourse is a *material* instance of social reality. This is borne out by any number of studies on the colonial experience which suggest that economic plunder and political and social oppression of the colonized went hand in hand with the colonizers’ technologies of knowledge production and strategies of representation of the colonized people. We discussed as much in chapter two where I analyzed orientalist/colonialist representations of caste. As Abdul Jan Mohamad puts it, there is a “profoundly symbiotic relationship between the discursive and material practices of imperialism”ⁱⁱ. Sarkar denigrates such studies as a fall-out of a culturalist “Saidian legacy” (he insists on trivializing the latter by repeatedly referring to it as “Saidian moods”). According to him, Said’s Orientalism signalled “the final collapse of the hopes of radical transformation through autonomous popular action, once aroused by Vietnam, May 1968 and the Prague Spring” (60).ⁱⁱⁱ

Sarkar’s valorization of “experience” or “fieldwork” or “popular action” over discourse and theory can perhaps be seen as what Leela Gandhi has called “the resurgence of anti-

intellectualism within leftist-thinking”(61). This anti-intellectualism takes the form of valorizing “visible” or “quantifiable” effects that in turn are seen to be the exclusive preserve of experience or praxis. Theory typically is seen as the preserve of the elite, sometimes even as an instance of a luxurious *angst* and as being completely unconnected with “live” concerns. Among one of Sarkar’s many indictments of *late SS* (*late* as in “dead”?), for instance, is that it ever so often “toy(s) with *moods* of epistemological uncertainty” (45, emphasis added). In fact, the connection between theory/postmodernism/postcolonialism and elitist indulgence is made time and again in Sarkar’s critique. His clarion call: it is high time “history” shake off its theoretical/postmodern baggage and get down to business-as-usual. That his notion of what is the “right” kind of subaltern/social history is as much an articulation of a particular “discourse” – “associated with flexible patterns of Marxian thinking and visions of more democratic and humane forms of socialism”, as he says (vii) – doesn’t seem to bother Sarkar much.

There is no space here to go into many of the other charges that Sarkar lays at the door of SS and other post-Orientalist historiographical practices in South Asia. Suffice it to say that my preoccupation in this thesis with the ways in which the non-modern, non-bourgeois practice of caste has been configured in historiographical and socio-anthropological discourses, does not allow me the luxury to share his stance on the futility of raising epistemological doubts about the representational practices of left-liberal academia. For my argument throughout this thesis has precisely to do with the limits of left-liberal thought when it comes face to face with practices such as those of caste. I cannot thus help but intellectually engage with the possibilities that post-Orientalist projects such as SS open up for ways of reading caste, ways that unsettle hegemonic articulations of it in terms

of a *lack*, as containing within it almost everything that marks South Asia's "sluggish" pace *en route* to modernity. This lack is what terms such as "pre-modern", "pre-capitalist", "communal", "il-liberal" and "un-democratic" in relation to caste mark. As we shall see in the following section, however, even SS has had problems dealing with the complex and heterogeneous ways in which caste has inscribed its presence on to the sprawling body of the Indian nation.

Caste, Capital, Democracy and Difference

As we saw earlier, in the epistemological template designated as orientalism, caste has figured as a key signifier of India's cultural difference from the West, and it, more than any other marker, is seen to designate the cause of India's inability to make a full transition to global modernity. In the light of this fact, it would be interesting to see the ways in which post-orientalist representational practices such as SS, for instance, have read caste in the context of India's modernity. I would like to begin by talking up one of the more interesting aspects of Sarkar's critique of SS. He writes that not all its critical reflexivity can rescue SS from the charge of elision as regards its representation of lower caste movements.

Sarkar points to the distinct discomfort of SS when it comes to accommodating within its framework dalit movements such as the one led by Ambedkar in Maharashtra or by Periyar in the South. One does not have to delve too far intellectually to account for such discomfort. In the early decades of this century the dalit movements in India drew inspiration from avowedly Enlightenment values even as they set themselves up in opposition to nationalist forces which they saw as representing predominantly Hindu Brahmanical interests. Both Ambedkar and Periyar, in some respects, welcomed the British

colonial intervention in Indian history as an event that could perhaps enable dalits to break with their hateful past, a past of brutal oppression at the hands of caste Hindus. To that extent, for the dalits colonial modernity was seen as redeeming even as they recognized the overweening imperial ambitions of the British. SS has so far been unable to represent within its parameters the dalit movement's own peculiar transactions with colonial modernity and indigenous nationalism. A clue to this elision or methodological impasse lies in a statement made by Dipesh Chakrabarty a few years ago:

Subaltern histories written with an eye to difference *cannot constitute yet another attempt...to help erect the subaltern as the subject of modern democracies, that is, to expand the history of the modern in such a way as to make it more representative of society as a whole.* This is a laudable objective in its own terms, and has undoubted global relevance. But thought does not have to stop at political democracy or the egalitarian distribution of wealth. Though the aim of achieving these ends will legitimately fuel many political struggles, this kind of thought is fundamentally insensitive to philosophical questions of difference and can acknowledge difference only as a practical problem. Subaltern histories will engage philosophically with questions of difference (1993, 427-8, emphasis added).

Since the "subaltern" – at a level that is philosophically radical – is the figure of "difference" that fractures the grand narratives of modernity, it cannot accommodate subject-positions such as those of the dalits (and their leaders such as Ambedkar and Periyar) who appear to ally themselves unproblematically with the projects of modernity and modernization. And yet at the level of "real" social relations the untouchable castes are the quintessential subalterns – those dregs at the bottom of what is still a deeply hierarchical society, and subject to multiple oppression. It is at such moments perhaps that the unworking of the Derridean/Foucauldian dimensions of SS appear to manifest themselves and the gap between subaltern history and social history in the South Asian context appears to widen.

It is precisely this gap that Sarkar addresses in the final chapter of Writing Social History. Entitled “Identity and Difference: Caste in the Formation of the Ideologies of Nationalism and Hindutva”, this essay traces the deep connections between militant low-caste protests and the rise of Hindutva nationalism in colonial and postcolonial India. Sarkar designates caste histories as “partially autonomous” or as “alternate” to the dominant histories of anti-colonial nationalism (360). In nationalist histories caste movements are typically treated as an aberrant other, as an impediment to a seamless nationalist stance against the colonizers. Likewise, the proponents of political Hindutva see dalit critiques of Brahmanical Hinduism as potentially detrimental to both their notions of territoriality (India for Hindus) and cohesive community. It is no coincidence that Nagpur in Maharashtra has been the centre of both the Ambedkar-led dalit mobilization *and* of the crystallization of Hindu nationalism in the form of the *Rashtriya Sevak Sangh* (RSS). Sarkar cites the following statement from an authorized history of the RSS to show the deep interconnectedness between the rise of low caste and dalit protests and the increasing militancy of political Hinduism:

In the last thousand years, the bonds that linked society were broken. This led to selfish caste mentality that divided society.... The RSS was organized to prevent the further disintegration of Hindu society (388).

To the extent that “caste” has been an unsettling figuration in the dominant ways of imagining the Indian nation, one would have thought that subaltern historiography would have had a substantial critical engagement with its many dimensions. Maybe the time for that has not passed. The editors of SS IX are conscious of that. They are aware, for instance, that the contribution of Kancha Ilaiah to their volume “represents a first for Subaltern Studies: it is the first time Subaltern Studies have engaged with contemporary discussions of Dalitbahujan politics in India” (Amin & Chakrabarty 1996, vii). Vijay

Prashad's essay in SS X, "Untouchable Freedom: A Critique of the Bourgeois-Landlord Indian State" (1999) is another attempt at incorporating hitherto occluded dimensions of caste-based issues in SS – the role of the nation-state and its technologies of modernization in negotiating caste differences in civil society and the dalit intervention in such negotiations. In his essay, Prashad through his ethnographic research on the Balmiki community in Delhi shows how immensely complex such negotiations and interventions have been and continue to be.

I would like to argue, however, that the inclusion of such essays on the dalit movement in SS, essays that do not share the project's investment in epistemological critique – Kancha Ilaiah's *dalitbahujan* framework with its *ressentiment*-imbued rhetoric does little more than Brahmin-bashing, and neither Prashad nor Ilaiah really read the dalit movement in terms other than those of modernization and democratic revolution – does not really do much to resist secular-historicist readings of caste, an intellectual resistance that could help us read caste as more than just an instrument of oppression or as a mark of India's backwardness, and as something that in fact is an inalienable component of the life-worlds of South Asians. It is not as if caste and the dalit movement cannot be read in such terms, in terms of worlding that exceed questions of social justice and modernization. In my chapter on dalit mythographies that follows this one, that is precisely the reading I undertake. It is just that the essays by Ilaiah and Prashad in SS do not engage with questions of caste in such terms. Why then does a project like SS that is committed to post-orientalist historiographical representation include them? The answer, I suggest, lies in its capitulation to the demands of critics like Sarkar who use the term "subaltern" as a stick with which to beat what they see as the elitist intellectual indulgences of SS. The assumption appears to be that all problems of representation will be taken care of once SS

extends its ambit to include all that it has previously been accused of occluding. In this context, I would like to once again invoke Chakrabarty's statement about the trope of the "subaltern" engaging "philosophically" with questions of *difference* and suggest that the tensions such engagement generates when juxtaposed with the avowed *democratic* impulse and imperative of SS – to give voice to those histories suppressed by mainstream left-liberal historiography – is an irresolvable one. I suggest that, in its dimension as historiography, the more the term "subaltern" is stretched to include all non-elite narratives (which is what historians such as Sarkar demand of it) – in other words, the more *democratic* it gets– the more difficult it will find to sustain itself as a sign that figurates *difference* philosophically. The project will in the process cease to gradually inhabit a radical and subversive theoretical space and will circulate as yet another instance of additive history-from-below. So while SS will be *democratically* laudable, its *intellectual* rigour will invariably be compromised.

To turn once again to the question of post-orientalist representations of caste, one finds that in the individual writings of Ranajit Guha, Gyan Prakash and Partha Chatterjee, (scholars who have contributed extensively to the eleven volumes of SS), caste has lent itself to being read in theoretically novel ways, ways that help us see caste as more than an obstacle to India's ability to make a full transition to capitalist modernity. In what follows I undertake a reading of two essays by Prakash and one essay by Chatterjee. Prakash's essays are titled "Reproducing Inequality: Spirit Cults and Labour Relations in Colonial Eastern India" (1986) and "Becoming a *Bhuinya*: Oral Traditions and Contested Domination in Eastern India" (1991). Chatterjee's essay is called "Caste and Subaltern Consciousness" (1989).

The first thing that is evident when one reads these essays is that both Prakash and Chatterjee read caste relations as inhabiting a field of power that is not subsumed either under the narrative of capital or that of the modern nation-state. It is not as if caste is seen to exist in some autonomous domain in their narratives; it is more that relations of capitalist production are also seen to speak of histories other than those of capital – those of caste, in Prakash’s work for instance. As he says, “A *Kamiya* is not just a *labourer* but a *Bhuinya* with a past and a future, with ancestors and descendants, a living person who defined himself in relation to the dead” (1986, 212, emphasis added).^{iv} But Prakash desists from marking these other historical traces as “pre-capitalist”. Nor does he use the infrastructural argument of someone like Omvedt and argue that caste is the primary form in which class relations continue to be manifested in rural India. Instead, in his account of class-caste relations in South Bihar he draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of “practice” that is not consciously rule oriented, but which is part of a repertoire of everyday living and which *reproduces* relations of social and economic inequality. The logic of such practice is *not determined* by the logic of either class or caste ideology. What bearing could either caste or class ideology have, for instance, on the practice of spirit cults of the labourers (*Kamias*) and the landlords (*Maliks*) that Prakash explores? And yet in the very practice of these rituals dealing with the invocation of various spirits, the *Kamias* and the *Maliks* draw on a repertoire of actions and perceptions unconsciously inculcated in the individual body and the social body, in short, in the domain of everyday practice, which in turn *reproduce* caste and class inequalities. Let me illustrate with an example from Prakash’s essay. He mentions an incident when an upper caste (*Kayasth*) landholder sought the help of an exorcist (*Ojha*) to help him cope with a desperate bout of cattle death. The *ojha* told him that it was the spirit of a lower-caste man from a nearby village which had caused the curse to befall his cattle, for the *Kayasth* landlord had apparently not returned a cow of the other

man that had accidentally strayed into his yard. The *ojha* named the lower caste spirit Jaibir Dak and told the landholder that he would have to sacrifice a pig to propitiate the spirit. Since the request of a pig went against the grain of his upper caste Hindu status, the Kayasth landlord managed to get the *ojha* change Jaibir Dak's demand to that of *goat-sacrifice* in the *backyard*. In the process he managed to keep his caste status uncontaminated, while propitiating the lower caste spirit at the same time. This event, as Gyan Prakash notes, could be read as one of cultural inconsistency. If the upper caste landlord went to the extent of influencing the terms of propitiation so as to preserve the purity of his own caste status, why did he feel the need to propitiate lower caste spirits in the first place? It is Bourdieu's notion of everyday practice as something removed from consciously articulated cultural norms that provides the answer. For the logic of the practice of spirit cults is not completely determined by the logic of caste. As Prakash puts it:

The articulation of caste hierarchy was not the major purpose of the ritual practice; the practical aim was to restore the harmony of the Kayasth landlord's world. But in doing so, ritual practices also expressed and reconstituted the social order (219).

Such practice reproduces caste inequality in the social domain at the same time as it provides the lower castes with an autonomous site of articulation within an overarching caste hierarchy. Gyan Prakash mentions another spirit cult that of the *malik devatas* that similarly reproduces class inequality, but which, at the same time, a historian or a social anthropologist would be hard put to account for in the language of capital as merely *reflecting* landlord-bonded labour relations.

Such manner of reading social relations in terms of everyday practice undercuts any theoretical approach that attempts to subsume the myriad socio-cultural practices of particular communities under one or other metanarrative. It would not be implausible to suggest that such practice-based representations are genealogical in the Foucauldian sense in that they foreground the essential unstableness of identity and cultural formations. The *kamiyas* are bonded labourers *and* lower caste *Bhuinyas*, and at times more or less one *or* the other, and sometimes, in everyday matters, not consciously either one or the other. Both class and caste identities are in such cases overdetermined. To use Foucault's words quite literally to mark the unsettled stature of Prakash's protagonists, "countless *spirits* dispute [their] possession...." (1984, *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*, 94, emphasis added).

I would like to begin my reading of Prakash's second essay, "Becoming a *Bhuinya*: Oral Tradition and Contested Domination in Eastern India" by once again invoking Michel Foucault. Only this time I am interested not in his genealogical concerns but in his critique of the sovereign/juridical model of power. Can Foucault's critique of the dialectical model of oppositional politics or what he calls the juridical notion of power – where the fields of the antagonists are clearly demarcated and we more or less know "who" is oppressing "whom" – begin to address histories of putative injustice? If such histories are read only in terms of violent confrontations, revolutions and counter revolutions, the answer would have to be no. In any revolutionary overthrow of an oppressive regime, it is the *adversarial* rhetoric of power that speaks. The liberators and oppressors are categorically referred to as being in opposite camps and the shifts in power and status of the antagonists are overt and tangible. Such narratives of injustice and retribution, whether of the left or the right,^v however, cannot give us a glimpse of the everyday world of unequal social relations where the domains of domination and struggle are not that clearly demarcated and where non-

confrontationalist modes of power and resistance continue to ceaselessly manifest themselves. It is at this level of everyday practice that Foucault's notion of the micro-politics of power speaks. And it is at this level that Gyan Prakash situates his narrative of lower caste resistance. He delves into the oral traditions of the *Bhuinyas* and reads them as "narratives constituted in power relations but not determined by them, speaking in terms of hierarchy while also rearranging it" (1992, 163). Prakash analyzes two types of *Bhuiinya* myths – one dealing with origin and the other with marriage-by-conquest. The *Bhuiinya* myth of origin unsettles the Hindu narrative of the given-ness or naturalness of caste hierarchy and ritual pollution by attributing the *Bhuiinya's* outcast(e) stature to historical causes. Each narrative quite clearly marks a particular site and a moment in time when a *Bhuiinya* ancestor was tricked into performing a labour that the caste Hindus considered polluting – such as lifting of a dead carcass or unwittingly eating the placenta of a new born calf. This act then marked the ancestor as ritually impure. Thus, there was nothing *natural* about his status as an untouchable. It was quite clearly the result of his labour in *historical* time. As Prakash says, such a narrative does not change the status of a *Bhuiinya* as an untouchable, but it certainly "riddles the ideology [of caste] with history" (160). In the process it provides the outcaste *Bhuiinyas* with a narrative space *inside* the field of power from which they resist hegemonic notions of the naturalness of caste hierarchy and articulate their own "becoming" as *Bhuiinyas*. The self-same nature of dominance is thereby fractured. The second myth under discussion, that of marriage-by-conquest – where a *Bhuiinya* ancestor acquires a warrior-like status by marrying a woman of chiefly lineage after defeating her more "appropriate" suitors – is likewise read by Prakash as unsettling the linkages that exist between *kamia-malik* (landlord-bonded labour) relations and the marriage of the *kamia/Bhuiinya* male progeny. Apparently, every time the son of a *kamia* got married, he had to seek the blessing of his *malik*. This blessing generally took

the form of money, grain or land. In return the *kamia* pledged his son's labour and loyalty to the *malik*. As Prakash puts it:

Marriage...was the occasion for the renewal of *kamia-malik* ties. The grant of material resources at this time made the *Bhuinya* familial reproduction dependent on the *malik's* munificence, and thereby transformed a rite of passage to adulthood into a rite of passage towards dependence (161).

The singing of the *Bhuinya* marriage-by-conquest tale on the occasion of a wedding, while it does not radically alter *kamia-malik* relations, nevertheless connotes a moment of disjunction in the process of "renewal" of the landlord-bonded labourer ties. The image of the ancestral *Bhuinya's* warrior-like stature, *almost, but not-quite* like the *malik*, flits across the fabric of established social relations and effects a semblance of a tear.

What we have here is not a documentation of *active* resistance on the part of the *Bhuinyas*, resistance that leads to a radical disruption of the social, political and economic order. Here is no Ambedkarite/dalit politics at work, no attempt to address issues of injustice and oppression in the language of liberal or radical democratic politics. Instead, we have here a language of resistance that draws on discourses long since delegitimated as pre-modern and hence considered unsuited to political struggles in modernity. How does one accommodate the *Bhuinya* myths of origin and notions of identity and struggle articulated therein, to the discourse of rights and citizenship? The language of the modern politics renders their strategies of resistance invisible. For their modes of resistance articulated through their oral narratives do not appear to have *visible* or *quantifiable* ameliorating effects. The *Bhuinyas* continue to be exploited as bonded labourers and as untouchables. Consequently, to the modern sensibility, the *Bhuinyas* appear passive and acquiescent. In fact, as Prakash notes, in orientalist discourses the tropes of passivity, acquiescence and

consensus marked the body of the native. For the European colonialists and social theorists could read agency and resistance only in *political* terms. This image of Indian society as passive continues to inform much social science discourse:

The overwhelming image of India's subordinated peoples – women, peasants, industrial workers and low-caste labourers – produced in historical and anthropological scholarship has been that of passivity. Specialists and non-specialists alike have presumed Hinduism, patriarchy, social dependency, and especially caste to be obstacles to the development of a capacity for resistance on the part of South Asia's underclasses (Prakash, 5).

It is only when one delves into the world of everyday practice of South Asia's underclasses that one can retrieve other languages of resistance that bespeak a domain of social relations where conflict is incessant or where, as Prakash puts it, "domination is being constantly forged and fissured" (16). Such studies of resistance in the world of everyday relations can be designated as post-orientalist not only to the extent that they challenge orientalist images of passivity of South Asian society, but also to the extent that they critique "modern" readings of resistance and agency articulated *only* in terms of the larger narratives of law, politics and capital.

Partha Chatterjee, in his long essay, "Caste and Subaltern Consciousness", likewise argues for the need to resist reading lower caste resistance in terms of a social scientific register. His argument is that such social scientific reading invariably situates its critique of caste in discourses whose histories are *external* to those of caste, such as liberalism and classical Marxism, for instance. The result is a series of anomalies and slippages that in turn broadly lead to historicist readings of Indian society as *not yet* ready for bourgeois modernity. Chatterjee instead suggests a model for an *immanent* critique of caste, that is, a critique that emerges from within the practice of caste itself. He does so by drawing on Gramsci's

notion that a critical study of subaltern consciousness can be made in terms of a repertoire of practices that broadly constitutes “common sense” in the domain of the popular. As is well known, Gramsci’s notion of critical practice underscores the need to connect intellectuals and masses in order to, as he says, “construct an intellectual-moral bloc which can make politically possible the intellectual progress of the mass and not only of small intellectual groups” (1971, 332-3). His is an elaboration of Marx’s argument about ideas becoming a material force. He invokes the notion of “common sense” in the popular domain to connote a repository of diffuse, amorphous traces of ideas and practices that the masses have internalized over time and about which they have no theoretical consciousness. Common sense, as Gramsci puts it, is “the folklore of philosophy, and is always half way between folklore properly speaking and the philosophy, science and economics of the specialists” (326). To that extent it is not rigid for it is constantly “enriching itself with scientific ideas and philosophical opinions that have entered ordinary life” (326). Further, it is seen to contain not only the assumptions and beliefs of the dominant groups that circulate as universal but also codes of *resistance* to them, albeit in *embryonic* forms. Such traces of subaltern resistance are, however, not taken into reckoning in most top-down philosophical-political attempts to transform the social order. The focus instead is on the passivity and fatalism of the subaltern, without a realization that “fatalism is nothing other than the clothing worn by the real and active will when in a weak position” (337). The task of the intellectual/philosopher is to make such codes of resistance *explicit*, that is, to seek the possibility of a critique of the social order *in* the consciousness of the subaltern and, in the process, lead the subaltern “to a higher conception of life” (332).

Chatterjee in his critique of caste focuses on the first part of the task, that is, to render explicit traces of resistance that inhabit the common sense of the subaltern castes. He does so in ways not dissimilar to Prakash's. He too delves into the myths of origin and numerous other everyday practices of the lowest castes (he draws his archive from studies of minor religious sects in Bengal) and shows the ways in which they continually fracture the Dumontian unification of the caste system on the basis of one ideology, that is, *dharma*. At the very least, such a reading enables him to foreground the question of *power* and *contingency* in the determination of caste relations, a question that is relegated to a residual status in synthetic studies of caste – that is, in studies that attempt to *contain* the divergence of caste practices on the basis of ideal categories and attempt to explain away exceptions as “empirical residue of unexplained observations” (Chatterjee 18). Chatterjee argues in a Gramscian manner that any process of *unification* of castes is also a process of conflict and contestation. And hence one that is historically contingent upon power relations. His account of *Vaishnava* cult in Bengal is a case in point. This conglomeration of heterodox minor religious sects that draws most of its followers from among the lower castes has, in the last four hundred years, served as a site of ceaseless struggle for doctrinal primacy of one or other caste group. If there was any principle of unity, it was but tenuous and contingent. Further, Chatterjee argues that such struggles are marked by the condition of subalternity in the sense that they do not appear imbued with a desire to “create a new universalist system”. Rather, they are “varying strategies of survival and self-assertion” (31).

What is interesting about such an attempt to outline a theory for an “immanent” critique of caste is the *register* in which it tries to render *explicit* what is implicit in the commonsense of the subaltern castes. Chatterjee cannot desist from reading in the everyday modes of

resistance of the lower castes a “desire for *democratization*” (48, emphasis added). The question that immediately comes to mind is why then does Chatterjee make such a fuss about the inappropriateness and ineffectiveness of so-called liberal critiques of caste in the first instance? For aren't the latter grounded in a belief in the efficacy of *democratic* institutions and practices, in the belief that all that the oppressed castes want is to be treated on par with other human beings? And if such critiques are unable to overcome their condition of “externality” vis-à-vis caste, what makes Chatterjee's reading of subaltern resistance in the register of democracy immune to the same charge? Doesn't he too attempt to impute to the communities he studies a notion of bourgeois equality that may not be part of their consciousness?

There is a problem, however, with such questioning. For it assumes that the only meaning of “democracy” is the one articulated within the tradition of bourgeois liberalism. Chatterjee appears to contest such a reading, but only in terms of articulating the need to undertake “a search, both theoretical and practical for the concrete forms of democratic community which are based neither on the principles of hierarchy nor on those of bourgeois equality” (50). While he does not say so himself, it is quite possible to read his words, especially those that talk of “concrete forms of democratic community” as hinting toward a more “performative” notion of the term “democracy”, a notion that sees possibilities of democratic ways of being and living that exceed its pedagogical underpinnings in the liberal traditions of European modernity. Such a notion is hard to theorize about especially in academic forums where there is such deep investment in certain legacies of liberalism that one cannot expect people to listen unless one begins from where they are at. It requires, in the context of Chatterjee's essay, a consideration of whether societies do not have embedded in them forms of popular sovereignty that they

live out even when formal or prescribed political structures appear authoritarian. Could it be that modern democratic theory, to the extent that it reifies certain forms and rituals of democracy – elections for instance – have not considered if human societies do not invariably have elements of genuine consensus built into them? Could the issue then be one of not/attuning our academic selves to these buried practices of democracy?^{vi} In the context of my thesis, for instance, thought about caste is so politically determined from the beginning that one knows, even before one has done any research, that caste was/is *wrong*. To open ourselves to other readings, to see what possibilities for living this “wrong” or “bad” thing contains, is to open up the categories of European political thought to the diversity of life-worlds, to unsettle its pedagogic certainties, to make a plea, in short, for reconceptualizing the “political”.

In a recent essay called “A Leftist Plea for Eurocentrism”, Slavoj Žižek, refers to liberal democracy as the “*gentrification* of politics proper in *regulated agon*” (1998, 994, emphasis added). He also describes the entire history of European political thought as “ultimately nothing but a series of *disavowals* of the *political moment*, of the proper logic of political antagonism” (991, emphasis added). Both these statements are invested in a notion of the “political” that perforce exceeds all academic/intellectual attempts to contain it in one or other theoretical framework. And that is the notion of the “political” that I precisely want to explore in much greater detail in the chapters of the following section. The political, I argue, entails the *fabrication* of new forms of social life out of the old. This *text-like, text-ile* quality of the political is something that deconstruction and/or poststructuralism – the notion of discursivity, in short – allows us to penetrate. Social Science analyses of caste with their underlying emancipatory narratives, I argue, cannot *make present* the language of caste. They can only see in it traces of a life-world that is for

them in a process of atrophy and quite rightly at that. They with their pedagogic zeal cannot but fail to disentangle the many connections that the *present* of caste bears to that which is regarded as representing the *past*. In the following section “Caste, Life-World, Narrative and the Aesthetic”, I, accordingly, carry over the notion of the discursivity of caste by shifting the focus from hegemonic articulations in academic knowledge-formations to representations of caste in the domain of art and narrative. I argue that the mythographic and the literary can give us insights into the “political” that social science by itself can never give. I use dalit mythographies and writings from other creative genres in dalit literature such as short story, poetry and life-writing to suggest that the fabrication and assertion of human(e) relationships within the context of struggle against oppression and exploitation follow unpredictable paths and point to a much more complex relationship between the past and the present of caste than social science narratives may allow.

ⁱ See especially Sumit Sarkar’s Writing Social History, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997). I discuss some aspects of Sarkar’s critique about caste and Subaltern Studies later in this chapter.

ⁱⁱ Cited in Ania Loomba, Colonialism/Postcolonialism, (London: Routledge, 1998), 99

ⁱⁱⁱ Sarkar interpretation of Said’s legacy seems limited to Orientalism alone. He takes into account neither the rethinking that Said has done over the years on his original thesis, nor the latter’s endorsement of political activism in his concerns about Palestine. Sarkar, who lays the blame at Said’s door for the folding back of social history into a reified culturalism, would perhaps be interested in the following words of Said: “It is the critic’s job to provide resistances to theory, to open it up toward historical reality, toward society, toward human needs and interests, to point up those concrete instances drawn from everyday reality that lie outside or just beyond the interpretive area necessarily designated in advance and thereafter by every theory.” (1983, 242)

^{iv} The term *Bhuiya* designates the low caste status of the labourer.

^v In an interview with Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino, Foucault noted that the discourses of the *left* and the *right*, up to the late-sixties, had addressed the “mechanics of power” very insufficiently, for the questions that they posed were circumscribed within the ambit of *politics*. Thus, on the right the problem of power “was posed only in terms of constitution, sovereignty, etc, that is, in juridical terms; on the Marxist side, it was posed only in terms of the state apparatus” (1984, 58). What such analyses did not take into reckoning was that the state could not begin to cover the entire gamut of power relations that encompassed human society. Or as Foucault puts it, “The state is superstructural in relation to a whole series of power networks that invest the body, sexuality, the family, kinship, knowledge, technology and so forth” (1984, 64). In the same interview he notes that the dialectic as the “logic of contradictions” tends to reduce the

complexities and intricacies of conflict to a “Hegelian skeleton” (57). He sees his own project as mapping the labyrinths and meshes – power as it is effective in everyday living – that the oppositional/dialectical model of power overlooks.

^{vi} I owe the thoughts in this paragraph to discussions with Dipesh Chakrabarty. His contribution to the development of these ideas has been invaluable.

SECTION TWO

CASTE, LIFE-WORLD, NARRATIVE AND THE AESTHETIC

CHAPTER SIX

FRAGMENTS OF WILFUL MEMORY **DALIT MYTHOGRAPHIES**

What reason plots as an asymptote is founded by an epistemic shuffle where God and man are indeterminately in each other's corner.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Contemporary social theory contains within it a set of secular reassurances that compensate for those lost by the death of God.

William Connolly

In this chapter I turn to a specific genre of writing on caste, a genre that engages with the past and present of caste and untouchability, but which does so by abjuring the protocols of academic research and turning instead to myths, legends and other ancient textual sources. I use the term “mythographies”ⁱ as shorthand to describe such writing. The mythographies that will be the focus of this chapter include some of the later writings of the dalit leader and intellectual Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar including his magnum opus The Buddha and his Dhamma (1957). Through these texts I hope to pursue in greater detail new ways of reading the political that I invoked towards the conclusion of the previous chapter, ways that enable one to read the story of India's modernity in terms of a complex weave of narratives and temporalities.

in the Puranic myths and in the epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. With the advent of British rule came European Orientalist discourse with its Aryan theory of race which further helped consolidate the caste system. An ethnic kinship was asserted between Europeans and the ancient Vedic people or the Aryans, and members of the Brahmin elite in Maharashtra such as Lokmanya Tilak were not exactly averse to using the Orientalists' arguments to justify untouchability and discrimination of other lower castes. Jotiba Phule staked a claim to "nationhood" and "first citizenship" by asserting that the *shudras* and the *ati-shudras* were the original inhabitants of this land, now dispossessed and delegitimated by the Aryan conquerors. This cultural reading was combined with an elaborate theory of economic exploitation, and peasant communities consisting primarily of lower castes were seen as the most exploited and ground-down segments of Indian society. This dichotomy of "*shudra-atishudra* peasantry versus the brahman bureaucracy and religious order" (Omvedt 1995, 21) went hand in hand with Phule's critique of patriarchy. His name continues to be invoked in present day Maharashtra by dalit, feminist and environmental activists.

It was, however, the rise of the Mahar leader, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, in the nineteen-thirties and his strident politico-cultural denunciation of the caste system coupled with his lifelong battle to generate a new identity for the oppressed castes – an identity they could don with pride – that gave the term "dalit" a force and currency that it carries to this day. As we shall see later, Ambedkar rejected Phule's race theory of caste, a theory that became immensely popular among other anti-caste activists, intellectuals and poets in the early years of this century. But he did see the sheer importance of forging a peasant-proletariat-lower caste socio-political front to counter the dominance of Hindu-Brahmanical forces in nation building. It was primarily through his intervention that the voices of the untouchable

castes began to be increasingly audible as they brought to the fore the failure of the Indian upper caste bourgeoisie to “speak” for the nation. Since the famed Gandhi-Ambedkar dispute in the nineteen-thirties, epitomized in Ambedkar’s dramatic yet poignant declaration, “Gandhiji, I have no homeland”, there has been an impressive proliferation of dalit historical and creative writing. It would be no exaggeration to say that Ambedkar is the founder of “dalit discursivity”. I use the phrase “founder of discursivity” in the Foucauldian sense of a figure who provides a “paradigmatic set of terms, images and concepts that organize thinking and experience of the past, present and future of society, doing so in a way which enigmatically surpasses the specific claims...[he/she] puts forth” (Rabinow 1984, 25). It was Ambedkar’s re-imagining and re-invention of lower caste and untouchable identity, both through his conversion to Buddhism and his mythographic attempts to critique dominant ways of writing about India’s past, that gave the term “dalit” the power and resonance it has today. Only after Ambedkar’s discursive attempts to frame its terms of reference could Gangadhar Pantawane, the founder-editor of *Asmitadarsh*, the main journal devoted to Dalit Literature, write:

To me Dalit is not a caste. He is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of this country. He does not believe in God, Rebirth, Soul, Holy Books teaching separatism, Fate and Heaven because they have made him a slave. He does believe in humanism. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution (cited in Zelliott 1992, 268).

Since the eighties the term dalit has begun to be used in conjunction with another term, “bahujan” (literally the “majority”), to connote a political and discursive front of lower-castes, ex-untouchables, peasants and women that purports to challenge the majoritarian claims of an aggressive Hindu nationalism. This front/movement is the most comprehensive and organized post-Ambedkarite mobilization of the outcast(e)s of modern India’s Hindu Brahmanical society.

The New Political

In the chapters so far I have traced the trajectory of social science and secular historical discourses on caste. I have argued that the deep investment of such discourses in the paradigm of Enlightenment and modernity and their enthusiasm for projects of social engineering whereby inequalities/disabilities generated by caste are desired to be gradually done away with, have not exactly enabled a conceptualization of caste to emerge that could help us go beyond questions of social justice. Nor do they help us theorize ways in which this non-modernⁱⁱ institution has transacted with colonial modernity and generated practices that can no longer begin to be visualized in historicist terms as oppressive relics of pre-modernity in postcolonial India. I have also argued that my raising the issue of caste in this manner, my critique in other words of the predominantly pedagogic thrust of social science discourses vis-à-vis caste, does not connote a disavowal or discounting of the oppressive dimension of caste practice in modern India and the importance of liberal democratic attempts to alleviate such oppression. It is just that, I argue, this pedagogic thrust is contained within the logic of a secular-historicist notion of what it means for human beings to be “political”, and not all dimensions of the past and present of caste practice and the life-worlds such practice has generated in South Asia, can begin to be contained within such logic. It is such a notion of the political that inheres in much academic writing on caste that we examined in the chapters preceding this one.

In a point analogous to the one just recounted, we have also seen that the notion of the “political” in the context of human oppression cannot be contained within the parameters of social scientific discourse. The arguments of Žižek, Chatterjee and others discussed in the previous chapter tell us as much. In the context of caste there is no ambiguity in the

social scientific approach regarding the trajectory of the former in the emergence and consolidation of Indian nationhood. Caste is categorically seen as an impediment to India's coming into nationhood and modernity. In such a reading the "political" is vested with a logic that is "secular" and "institutional" and in the final analysis, "historicist" (Chakrabarty 2000, *Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Historiography*, 12). It is precisely such a logic that, as Ranajit Guha has shown us in his The Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency (1983), and, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued recently in his Provincializing Europe, that has driven western liberal political theory/Marxist historiography to categorize all non-bourgeois life-practices and mass mobilizations as "pre-political"ⁱⁱⁱ. According to Guha's now well-known re-conceptualization of the notion of the "political" in the context of peasant studies, "the political sphere in which the peasant and his masters participated was modern...and yet it did not follow the logic of secular-rational calculations inherent in the modern conception of the political" (Chakrabarty 12). What logic did it then follow? According to Chakrabarty's explication of Guha's argument, the peasants invoked the logic of "relationships of direct domination and subordination that derive[d] their legitimation from a different set of institutions and practices including those of Dharma" (19). Guha's theorizing, in other words, has enabled us to conceive of a political domain in modern India in which "the secular languages of law and constitutional frameworks coexist[s] and interact[s] with non-commensurable strategies of domination and subordination" (21).

In my reading of the "political" vis-à-vis caste and dalit mythographies in this chapter, it is precisely Guha's articulation of the two logics of power defining colonial modernity in India that I draw on. For it enables me to argue that caste being a non-bourgeois life-practice *par excellence*, any attempt to read it conceptually in excess of the demands of

social justice, in other words, to read it as a continuing form of practice, to read it as a component that both constitutes India's modernity *and* is a thread that is woven into the fabric of the Indian life-world, is also to unsettle the secular-historicist basis of the conceptualization of the "political" in European thought. Such unsettling opens up other ways of reading the "political" that allow for a richer understanding of non-European life-practices of which caste can be considered a prime example. More importantly, I see in Guha's theorization of the new political, a braiding together of two discrete temporalities such that the two are interminably in conversation with each other and generate a heterogeneity that in turn brings anxiety both to those committed to *modern* ways of dwelling and those who invoke *tradition* in order to resist the juggernaut of the "true present". I see my reading of dalit mythographies in this chapter as an attempt to capture precisely this heterogeneity.

Such temporal braiding and heterogeneity do not just render all attempts to categorize social practices within the dichotomy of traditional/modern extremely problematical, but more importantly, shake the very conceptual foundations of this dichotomy in European political thought. In that sense they partake of the New Humanist gesture of contesting what I referred to in chapter one, as the normative modernity of liberal academia, an intellectual position that believes that the multiform realities of human existence can actually be rendered transparent within the total framework of one or another European political philosophy. The new humanist/postcolonial interventions in academia remind us that such philosophy is made to account for human practices whose genealogies have nothing in common with those of the philosophy that is invoked to account for them. It is such interventions that are central to my argument in the thesis for they help me distinguish

my position about heterogeneity from critiques of the tradition/modernity dichotomy found in much social science writing on caste and religion.

Let me elaborate with the help of an example from Susan Rudolph's essay, "Beyond Modernity and Tradition – Theoretical and Ideological Aspects of Comparative Social Sciences" (1979). As the title indicates, Rudolph attempts to engage with the problem of the appropriateness or otherwise of using labels such as traditional and modern to mark the politics of caste and democracy in post-independence India. But such engagement, as I discuss below, does not in the final analysis deconstruct the traditional/modern binary. On the contrary it invests quite strongly in the idea of modernization. In her discussion on caste and affirmative action, Rudolph notes that a "transformed version of this 'traditional' structure [that is, caste] had become a vehicle for representative and parliamentary democracy and was functioning as a democratizing force" and that, in this sense, "'traditional' structures and communities of sentiment, identity and action seemed to us by no means irrelevant *even to* competitive democratic politics and the realization of egalitarian values" (26, emphasis added). If I may invoke the pedagogic/performative distinction that I deployed in chapter one, we note here an appeal to the performative dimension of caste, except that in this case the performative is not conceptual excess but practice as distinct from the national-political pedagogic that would desire to render invisible the effect of caste on the state and body politic. But as my emphasis on the phrase "even to" highlights, such reading of the impact of caste on democratic politics does not problematize the traditional/modernity binary. Caste as hierarchy, caste as community, is still pre-modern. When it enters the domain of democratic politics it enters as "anti-caste" in that "the horizontal mobilization of larger lower caste communities was gaining them power, status and wealth which allowed them *to challenge and overturn the*

hierarchy of caste as ritual rank" (26, emphasis added). Thus, in analyzing the performative dimension of caste Rudolph can only subsume it under the egalitarian logic of democracy and the stage-ist logic of modernization. The traffic is still one-way and historicist. There is no conceptual reworking to foreground the plurality that this could connote for the very meaning of democracy itself. The normative modernity of liberal academia continues to hold its head high.

It cannot be emphasized enough that mine is not so much a plea to overthrow liberal thought or declare the invalidity/falsity of the conceptual and methodological moorings of Social Science, as an attempt to mark those traces in the South Asian experience of caste that frequently interrupt these other readings, and which are either ignored or smoothed over by the latter in order to keep intact their seamless command over the narrative of modernity in South Asia. It is the recovery of such traces that allows one to theorize about the heterogeneity or not-oneness that inheres in concepts such as tradition or modernity or democracy or the political as they circulate globally. I would go on to suggest that it is the Derridean/deconstructive notions of the text and the supplement that provide an invaluable heuristic device with which to recover such traces and that the use of such textual reading strategies could very effectively supplement the field-empiricism of social scientific research. It is for all these reasons that I choose as my proof-texts the mythographic writings of Ambedkar, for what we see in these texts is an articulation of his immense faith in the tenets of liberal democracy and modernization in a language and form that is incommensurable with the logic of such tenets. Ambedkar's texts, in other words, draw not on social science modes of reasoning but on the enchanted rhetoric of myths and legends to conjure up worlds for the dalits that are completely *devoid* of all agents of enchantment and the supernatural! One cannot begin to theorize about the power and impact of such

anomalous texts on the politics of dalitization in India unless one radically rethinks the very notion of what it means to be *modern* and *political* in a postcolonial world.

In my conclusion to the previous chapter, I spoke of the text-like, text-ile quality of the political. It is a quality that enables one to see the past and present of a community/nation in terms of a language weave that one can begin to disentangle/decipher in ways that the political as a pedagogic mode, the political as embedded in a historicist logic, the political as statecraft, cannot make available to us. It is a recognition of the paradox that inhabits modern/revolutionary/historicist notions of the political, the paradox that “the *new* can be imagined and expressed only through a *language* made out of languages *already available*” (Chakrabarty 2000, *Provincializing Europe*, 245, emphasis added). It is a paradox that has generated much anxiety in the minds of the moderns. The most vivid expression of such anxiety, and one that has been quite extensively documented, is to be found in Marx’s writings^{iv}. As Ashis Nandy wryly puts it: “For Marx, ill health follows from history; health either from the present or the future” (1983, 58). It is a critical commonplace that Marx’s critique of the past was intimately linked to his notion of the imperative of social justice. Past forms of community and social practices were seen as invariably more oppressive than those of the present. Hence his frequently laudatory references to the rise of the bourgeoisie, for, as he and Engels put it:

The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus *rescued* a considerable part of the population from the *idiocy of rural life*. Just as it has made the country dependent on the towns, so it has made *barbarian* and *semi-barbarian* countries dependent on the *civilized* ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the *East* on the *West* (1972, *Manifesto*, 339, emphasis added).

This mode of “subjection” – of the rural by the urban, of the peasant by the bourgeoisie, of the barbarians by the civilized, of the East by the West – was, for Marx, justified in the name of human progress. As he put it in another context, (in the context of British rule in India, to be precise), human progress *had to cease* to resemble “that hideous pagan idol, who would not drink the nectar but from the skulls of the slain”(1974, 87). Here is articulated a desire for what modernity’s relationship with the past (and the non-secular) *ought* to be. It is a relationship where the past ought to be well and truly just that – the “past”, as something that is completely left behind, overcome, transcended. To establish such a relationship between the past and the present, to consider the past as truly dead requires, as Marcos Natalie (2000) puts it, “an active will”. Such a will is necessary, he adds, “not to bring the past into the present, but to conceal it and to send it back to the past, not to resurrect it but to kill it” (29). When Marx spoke of a “face” that human progress could not have, he was not talking of the already-in-the-past quality, the *pastness*, of that face. What bothered him was the *presence* of that “hideous pagan idol”, a presence that could on no account be allowed to scar the face of modernity, a presence, hence, that needed to be concealed or killed in order for the “true present” of modernity to emerge.

A similar desire for a secularized “true present” marks social science studies of caste. In the context of dalit studies one notes the discomfort of many social scientists with Ambedkar’s mythographic reconstruction of the dalit past and his preoccupation with Buddhism in the last years of his life. For instance, Gail Omvedt, whose historical-materialist analysis of the Ambedkarite movement is informed and extensive, has this to say about the fall out of Ambedkar’s tryst with Buddhism:

The inherent problems in simply a “religious” solution remained; Dalits embracing Buddhism could get caught up in other forms of superstition; very often Ambedkar’s very

rationalism seem simply to have left ground for re-entry of superstition centered around Ambedkar himself, the 'king of dalits' (1994, 249).

Another recent study of Ambedkar attempts to situate his writings within the framework of what is called "distributive justice". Vidhu Verma in her essay, "Colonialism and Liberation: Ambedkar's Quest for Distributive Justice" (1999), writes perceptively about Ambedkar's reworking of liberal thought. But at a crucial moment in her argument she stumbles for she cannot fathom how Ambedkar's hermeneutic turn toward Buddhist discourse can be accommodated within a social scientific reading of justice, which necessarily endorses a decisive break from non-secular idioms of an oppressive past. It is not that she is uncomfortable with the whole of The Buddha and his Dhamma, only with Ambedkar's use of certain concepts such as *ahimsa*, rebirth, *karma*, *nirvana*, which have a prior textual, non-secular history in Vedic Hinduism. Ambedkar's attempts to scientize these concepts are obviously not enough. Where Verma is concerned she would rather he had not used them; they make his project "weak":

Indeed, by spending considerable energy exploring key conceptions in Buddhism such as *ahimsa*, rebirth, *karma*, etc., Ambedkar leaves us wondering how helpful Buddhism is if the terminology is so open to interpretation (2809).

In a later section of this chapter I take up the misgivings of both Omvedt and Verma and read into them an inability to theorize about the multifarious, heterotemporal ways in which caste writes itself into the body politic of modern India. It is an inability that, needless to say, is not personal but disciplinary.

My last example of social scientific presentism comes from the work of India's justly celebrated social anthropologist M.N Srinivas. In a display of the "active will" that desires

to kill the past, Srinivas writes in one of his earliest programmatic tracts on caste: “Caste is an institution of prodigious strength and it will take a lot of beating before it will die” (1962, 72). In what follows I look further into Srinivas’ articulations on caste and foreground a language weave that *makes present* the idiom of caste even as the logic of his statements vehemently asserts a desire to be free of it. As an example, I read the following:

Religion, sect, caste, language, region, town and village, all develop self-consciousness. Many if not most of these loyalties are more immediate than a loyalty to a vast and heterogeneous entity like India. It will take some years before a proper hierarchy of loyalties is established and *immediate loyalties not given priority over loyalty to India* (1962, 13, emphasis added).

This statement lends itself to at least three readings; each in its own way is a take on the relationship between past and present of India. In the first (and the most obvious and might I say “logical”) reading, the past of India is categorically seen as something that should desirably/ideally be left behind. There is, in fact, a strong plea here for firmly rejecting that past. We see it in the way the nation-state and modernity are posited as objects deemed worthy of the loyalty of the *new* Indian citizen. His/her “immediate” loyalties to caste, religion, etc. are read as pre-modern and hence as a hindrance to the emergence of a strong nation-state. A more nuanced second reading reveals a slight tension in this conception of the trajectory of modernity in India. It is a trajectory where modernity in India is stalled for the time being while the past plays itself out in the present in the form of “immediate loyalties”. This reading is nevertheless intimately connected to the first in the sense that the coming of nationhood and modernity are seen as imminent. It appears as purely a matter of time before India is all set to come to its full “presentness”. The arduousness of this

process is, however, not to be underestimated. As Srinivas puts it elsewhere in the same essay, “India, it is obvious, will not be built in a day” (13).

A third reading and one that for the moment sets the kernel of Srinivas’ *thought* aside to focus on the language, the literalness of the passage, on his *rhetoric* in short, reveals a reading of a particular relation between past and present, one that completely disrupts the logic of the first two readings – the logic that underpins social scientific readings of caste as pre-modern, and hence, as belonging to a past that modernity will eventually overcome/obliterate. Let me elaborate. Srinivas talks of the importance of India’s coming into nationhood and sees it as part of the process of a “vast and heterogeneous” pre-modern entity’s emergence into modernity. The process, as we saw, would, for the Indian citizen, connote a gradual weakening and eventual atrophy of existing/pre-modern community ties and a corresponding strengthening of allegiance to the nation. In describing this process, however, Srinivas uses two terms that go against the logic of this process, that, in fact, radically bring home to us its very impossibility^v. The terms are “loyalty” and “hierarchy”. He uses these terms not only in the context of pre-modern community-related allegiances, but also, more importantly, to describe the nature of the Indian citizen’s relationship to the new nation:

It will take some years before a proper *hierarchy* of *loyalties* is established and immediate *loyalties* not given *priority* over *loyalty* to *India* (13, emphasis added)

The emergence of India as a “nation”, then, far from connoting a *break* with pre-modern community ties, is *literally annexed* to the logic of those ties, as the use of terms “loyalty” and “hierarchy” indicate. In such a reading, the process of coming into modernity connotes, for the Indian citizen, *not a decisive break with the past*, but merely a slight adjustment in

the order of his/her existing allegiances. India, the nation, is added to his/her list of other “loyalties” such as those of religion, caste, village, etc., except that it is expected to ideally top the list. In such a reading, we see Srinivas *making-present* the language of the *past* – “hierarchy”, “loyalty”, – in a way that goes completely against the grain of his intended logic.

In this brief analysis we see what Gayatri Spivak, drawing on Derrida, calls “the jagged relationship between rhetoric and logic”, where “logic allows us to jump from word to word by means of clearly indicated connections” while rhetoric “work(s) in the silence between and around words in order to see what works and how much” (1993, 181). She also goes on to say how a focus on the logical at the expense of the rhetorical allows us to remain “safe” (180). Safe from what, one might ask. Safe, one might say – drawing on Heidegger and Derrida – from the energy and flourish, even the excesses of the world-disclosive power of language that finds its purest form in the self-referentiality of the poetic expression, and one that threatens the cognitive, problem-solving dimension of linguistic usage. In the social scientific piece referred to above, however, the rhetorical dimension does not exactly threaten the cognitive thrust of Srinivas’ argument. That is as it should be. For, as Habermas puts it in his lecture on “Levelling the Genre Distinction between Philosophy and Literature”:

The world-disclosive linguistic framework is almost at a standstill in the routines of everyday practice. The same holds true of the specialized languages of science and technology, law and morality, economics, political science, etc. They too live off the illuminating power of metaphorical tropes; but *the rhetorical elements, which are by no means expunged, are tamed*, as it were, and enlisted for special purposes of problem solving (1987, 209, emphasis added).

Nevertheless, as we saw in the case of Srinivas, even the so-called “tamed” rhetorical elements in a piece of social scientific writing can enable one to emerge with readings that go against the grain of logical intention or “meaning-intention”^{vi} of such writing. In the section that follows I deploy the “unsafe” reading strategies outlined above to examine the mythographical writings of the dalit leader Dr. B.R Ambedkar and, in the process, trace the jagged contours of his tryst with caste and colonial modernity in India.

Of Vernacular Pasts and Principled Forgetfulness

In a wry attempt to claim an intellectual genealogy for himself, Ambedkar once wrote:

The Hindus wanted the Vedas and they sent for Vyasa who was not a caste Hindu.
The Hindus wanted an Epic and they sent for Valmiki who was an Untouchable.
The Hindus wanted a Constitution and they sent for me.^{vii}

There are two details in this Ambedkarite jibe at Hinduism that provide me with a point of entry into his discursive engagement with caste. The first is a reference to Ambedkar’s key role in drafting the Constitution of independent India. The second is an attempt to insert his redemptive role as a dalit within a fantasized narrative of Hindu Brahmanical incompetence and tyranny, and lower caste creativity and triumph. I read the two as metonyms for the dual, intertwined, though not necessarily commensurable, trajectories of Ambedkar’s engagement with colonial modernity and Indian nationalism. With the first can be associated his endorsement, as the political leader of the dalits, of the apparatus of both Enlightenment modernity and societal modernization, an inventory of which has recently been very adroitly drawn up by Dilip Gaonkar in his introduction to a recent issue of Public Culture devoted to the theme of “Alternative Modernities”:

Societal modernization...involves a set of cognitive and social transformations.... The cognitive transformations include or imply the growth of scientific consciousness, the

development of a secular outlook, the doctrine of progress, the primacy of instrumental rationality, the fact-value split, individualistic understandings of the self, contractualist understandings of society, and so on; the social transformations refer to the emergence and institutionalization of market-driven industrial economies, bureaucratically administered states, modes of popular government, rule of law, mass-media, and increased mobility, literacy and urbanization (1999, 2).

Ambedkar's training in the Social Sciences, Law and Economics at Columbia and the London School of Economics, saw him return to India in the nineteen-twenties armed with an intellectual arsenal that demanded nothing short of a complete socio-cultural overhauling of what he saw as a decrepit, caste-ridden, Hindu Brahmanical society. His numerous battles with Indian nationalist leaders, foremost among them being Gandhi, have been so extensively documented that there is little point in recounting them here. Suffice it to say that Ambedkar denounced the practice of caste as an ultimate abomination and voiced his desire to eradicate its hierarchical structures from the face of this earth ever so often and never more vehemently than in his tract The Annihilation of Caste (1968). In this he donned the mantle of the classic revolutionary who wanted to see the past as well and truly dead. He desired nothing more than a disjunction between the past of Hindu Brahmanical India and the present of India as a democratic republic. This was the Ambedkar who, as student of John Dewey in Columbia, endorsed the objectivity and empiricism of social science analysis of caste and undertook not a few such analyses himself. As Valerian Rodrigues puts it, Ambedkar would have wholeheartedly agreed with Dewey's outlining of the task of social science as one of repairing "moral and social beliefs and practices by encouraging the application of scientific methods and critical intelligence to them" (Rodrigues 1993, 305). This was also the socialist Ambedkar who shied away from the Gandhian register of the religious and the spiritual in attacking the

practice of untouchability, who publicly expressed his lack of interest in Temple-Entry movements initiated by Gandhi and others, and who railed against religious practice and superstition:

The appearance of Tulsi leaves around your neck will not relieve you from the clutches of the money-lenders. Because you sing songs of Rama, you will not get a concession in rent from the landlords. You will not get salaries at the end of the month because you make pilgrimages every year to Pandharpur.^{viii}

However, with the second point that I foreground in my reading can be associated an attitude to the past that appears to claim continuity rather than disjunction. Further, it makes a foray into the realm of the non-secular and the mythical as his references to Vyasa, the author of the *Mahabharata* and Valmiki, the author of the *Ramayana*, indicate. This is the site on which can be located Ambedkar's fragmented historiographical/mythographical tracts that engage in a dialogue with dominant ways of reading the Indian past, and his conversion to Buddhism. On this site we see a different take on religion. In the Mahar conference of 1936 held in Bombay, Ambedkar for the first time publicly declared his intention to convert to another religion. His plea for conversion, as Zelliott notes, reads like a litany:

Religion is for man; man is not for religion,
If you want to gain self-respect, change your religion,
If you want to create a co-operating society, change your religion,
If you want power, change your religion,
If you want equality, change your religion,
If you want independence, change your religion,
If you want to make the world in which you live happy,
change your religion.^{ix}

This plea, when inserted into a reading of Ambedkar as a secular, rational, modern intellectual and activist, could be seen as articulating a purely instrumentalist notion of religion and conversion as something that is a means to what is eventually a secular end,

political and social freedom.^x It is such a reading that informs the following statement by the well-known dalit writer, Shankarrao Kharat:

I have accepted the Buddhist Dhamma. I am Buddhist now. I am not a Mahar, nor an Untouchable, nor even a Hindu.... I have become independent. I am now free. I have now become a free citizen of independent India.^{xi}

We see here the figure of the Mahar-Buddhist collapsed into or reduced to the bourgeois-modern category of the citizen. In this sociological mode of translation^{xii} from the specificity of the Mahar experience of conversion to the generality of the discourse of capitalist transition to modernity, what is left by the theoretical wayside are aspects of the Buddhist conversion that resist incorporation into such transition discourse. In my reading of the Ambedkarite mythographies and the Mahar mythicization of Ambedkar and Buddha it is precisely such aspects and their opacity to social scientific generalization that I foreground. Needless to say, such a reading does not discount the validity of the transition-to-capitalist-modernity narrative. It merely suggests that such narrative has a constitutive outside that resists incorporation into or is a supplement to the generalizing impulse of sociological categories. This is also what prevents me from sharing the Dalit Panther non-Marxist poet-activist Raja Dhale's position on the conversion as purely a turning again of the wheel of dharma,^{xiii} or of those scholars who read Ambedkar's engagement with Buddhism only in the context of the revival of Buddhism in twentieth century South Asia and do not take into consideration his role in drafting the constitution of India and his endorsement of liberal democratic ideals.

In the mythic histories that I now go on to discuss, Ambedkar does not partake of the "lexicon of a post-enlightenment reason that provided historiography and nationalism with much of their distinctive vocabulary" (Guha 1992, 302). How does one then read this

paradox of a secular modern intellectual and political activist seeking recourse to rhetorical devices – genealogies, parables, tales-within-tales – that are the prerogative of men belonging to “archaic” societies? For, as Mircea Eliade puts it in Beane and Doty’s Myths, Rites, Symbols:

Rites, Symbols:

While a modern man, though regarding himself as the result of the course of universal history, does not feel obliged to know the whole of it, the man of the archaic societies is not only obliged to remember mythical history but also to *re-enact* a large part of it periodically. It is here that we find the greatest difference between the man of archaic societies and modern man...(1976, 5).

Where Ambedkar’s corpus is concerned, the binaries of history/myth and modern/archaic, as we shall go on to see, obviously cannot be sustained.

What do these “archaic” rhetorical strategies used by Ambedkar achieve? Ambedkar’s history-as-critique, I argue, transforms the given dominant historiographical mode (that is, Nationalist) from an *authoritative* one to an *internally persuasive* one. Through a strategic use of Bakhtin and Benjamin I demonstrate that, in dalit historiography, modern historical consciousness, as it had come to exist in the subcontinent’s colonial context – recouped within terms of Brahmanical reason – gets deflected, threatening at times to erupt into fantasy. This is seen in the recovery of the “Buddha” and the “Buddhist” subject in the works of Ambedkar and the Mahar mythicization of Ambedkar himself. The latter manifests itself in modes of adulation not unlike those in the *Bhakti* tradition in that it is expressed through songs and worship of both the Buddha and Ambedkar as deities. It is a phenomenon, as we saw earlier, that is read by Omvedt as “superstition”, as an unfortunate fall out of Ambedkar’s non-secular attempts to tackle the issue of untouchability.

Benedict Anderson has written about “amnesias” that invariably accompany all profound changes in human consciousness. Out of such oblivion, he says, spring narratives (1983, 204). Identity, in other words, is constructed out of, and through the remarkable, if paradoxical, dynamic of remembering/forgetting. The narratives I am about to discuss, the parallel or reverse historiography of the dalits as embodied in the writings of Babasaheb Ambedkar, bear out Anderson’s thesis. One could add to it and suggest that the “amnesia” that inaugurates the dalit’s search for identity and historical valency is *willed*. And from it spring narratives that blast open the continuum of Hindu-Aryan history.

The writings of Ambedkar constitute the core of these narratives. In his tracts such as “Revolution and Counter-revolution in India”, “The *Shudras* and the Counter-Revolution”, “Ancient India on Exhumation”, “The Ancient Regime-The State of the Aryan Society”, “Reformers and Their Fate” and “The Decline and Fall of Buddhism”, Ambedkar challenges the Brahmanical conception of a unified, homogeneous Hindu India before the advent of Islam.

Much of the ancient history of India is no history at all. Not that ancient India has no history. It has plenty of it. But it has lost its character. It has been made mythology to amuse women and children. This seems to have been done deliberately by the Brahmanical writers (1987 Vol.III, 151).^{xiv}

He then proceeds to exhume three “Indias” from the debris to which “authentic” ancient Indian history had been reduced by the dominant Brahmanical discourse:

- The India of Brahmanism, or the Aryan society of the Vedic period; in reality, according to Ambedkar, a barbaric phase.
- The India of Buddhism, with the Magadha-Mauryan empires embodying the pinnacle of human civilization, where all Indians were treated as equal and with dignity.

- The India of Hindu counter-revolution, heralded historically with Pushyamitra Sunga's rise to power, and associated with Manu, the Hindu law maker who legitimized and codified the caste system.

The first phase was, for Ambedkar, the last word in decadence and debauchery. His writings on the Vedic period read, in fact, like a Victorian tract. Ambedkar sniffs with displeasure and outrage as he catalogues, with the moral zest of a puritan, the many vices that the barbaric Aryans were prone to: gambling, alcoholism, sexual promiscuity, incest and even bestiality. He called this phase the period of the "sunken priesthood" (1987 Vol. III, 158).

His writings on the second phase herald the arrival of the first great reformer in Indian history – Gautama Buddha. According to Ambedkar, Buddha purged the Aryan society of its many evils and constructed a socio-religious domain that, for the first time, radically challenged the caste-hierarchy of the Brahmanic ethos. As I argue later, the Buddhist period was for Ambedkar not merely one phase among many in the continuum of Indian history. In its glorious, non-Hindu defiance, it signalled for him and for the *dalits* subsequently, a cataclysmic rupture, a break that has since been smoothed over by the dominant historiographical and mythological traditions in their attempts to either assimilate Buddha into the pantheon of Hindu gods, or treat Buddhism as just another manifestation of *Sramanism* that had been gathered together, with other *sramanik* sects, under the paternalistic banner of Hinduism.

In his story of the third phase in ancient Indian history, Ambedkar documents the triumph of Brahmanic Hinduism, during which caste structures became rigid and codified. It was during this phase that the high texts of the Hindu religion were written and constructed: the Manusmriti that spelled doom for the untouchables, the Mahabharata, the Ramayana and the Bhagvad Geeta.

There are many possible readings of Ambedkar's retrieval of the Buddhist phase in ancient Indian history. The most common one is a secular, instrumentalist reading in which Ambedkar's mythographical foray into India's past and the eventual conversion of his community to Buddhism is seen as an adjunct to his more important political attempts to mobilize the untouchable castes against Hindu, upper caste dominance in the national-political scene. Such is the reading undertaken by Gail Omvedt, in her book, Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India (1994). She defines the political domain as one of "state power and of the parties that contest for state power" and goes on to assert that this domain "not scholarly research even of a radical type, was the milieu in which Ambedkar moved and lived". She adds: "He was above all a man of strategy, of practical politics" (249). From asserting the primacy of political activism over his "non-political" writing and research (240), Omvedt goes on to suggest that Ambedkar's attempt to recast Hindu-Aryan historiography, idiosyncratic as it may appear to those acclimatized to the dominant mainstream historical discourse, can nevertheless be best understood as an effort to construct an alternative political identity of the oppressed "based on non-north Indian and low-caste perspectives, critical not only of the oppressiveness of the dominant Hindu caste society but also of its claims to antiquity and to being the major Indian tradition" (244). Ambedkar's retrieval of Buddhism to which he gave a "liberation theology" interpretation as *dhamma* or social morality and not as

dharma or religious ethics, achieved at least for a short span of time what other subaltern insurgencies had failed to achieve: the mobilizing of a percipient low-caste, non-Hindu identity into a collective and radical modern political force in India. In such a reading, the idiom of caste rearticulated by Ambedkar in terms of an exhumated Buddhist ethos gives way to or is collapsed into the idiom of democratic politics:

The development of “Ambedkarism” in India can be seen as the *particular expression of a world-wide “democratic revolution”*, indeed perhaps the most consistent one possible in Indian conditions (certainly more consistent than a “proletarian socialism” which ignored cultural-caste issues and accepted identities such as “Harijan” and “Hindu”), one which had grown out of the experiences and situations of the most oppressed sections of the people (239, emphasis added).

In seeing Ambedkar’s recasting of dalit identity in Buddhist terms as a *particular* manifestation of a *universal* political ethos and practice – democracy – what is lost or is smoothed over are traces of the particular that resist such subsuming under the universal and that tell us about ways of belonging in this world that are in excess of the generalizing impulse of sociological categorizing. A much more complex recent reading, one undertaken by Gauri Vishwanathan (1998), attempts to critique the displacement of faith and the religious in such instrumentalist readings. Drawing on recent studies of religion and conversion she argues that Ambedkar’s engagement with Buddhism can be reduced neither to the register of political ideology and manoeuvre nor be relegated to the domain of religious belief, a domain which, as Talal Asad in his Genealogies of Religion argues, has in contemporary times been articulated as the site of modernity’s alienated self. Religious experience in Ambedkar’s case, Vishwanathan argues, is “constitutively political”, not merely an adjunct to his negotiations with the powers-to-be of the new Indian nation-state:

The advent of the Buddha and the conversions of women, outcastes and the rich alike to Buddhism in classical Indian history occur during a period of crisis brought on by corruption, material disparities, and widespread neglect of collective responsibilities. The spiritual impoverishment of Brahmanical Hinduism produced not metaphysical despair but a profound sense of injustice, which Ambedkar clearly saw as the heart of the Buddhist conversion experience (230).

Conversion, in Vishwanathan's analysis, works powerfully as an epistemological concept by reclaiming "religious belief from the realm of intuitive (non-rational) action to the realm of conscious knowing and relational activity" (176). The worldliness of belief is what acts of conversion such as Ambedkar's foreground. In the process they also bring to the fore a non-historicist reading of religious experience such that the latter is no longer seen as having been sublated or subsumed under the discourse of secularism and modernity (as the realm of the private and the individual) but is rather the *outside* that inheres in the very notion of the secular itself.

I would go on to argue that it is this *outside* that Ambedkar's mythographic narratives and his subsequent conversion to Buddhism exhume. I would like to stay for a while with this trope of "exhumation", for I see it as speaking to my concerns about the political as a discursive weave in which past and present are played out in ways that resist linear, historicist readings. Death, exhumation and the role of narrative have preoccupied historians and philosophers of history such as Jules Michelet, Michel Certeau, Paul Ricoeur and Walter Benjamin. The French historian Michelet likened the historian to a medium in a *séance* who brings the dead into contact with the living. He repeatedly spoke about his fear and desire of resurrecting or exhuming a past that might not have died before it was buried^{xv}. Certeau, on whose writing the influence of Michelet is palpable, conceives

of history as originating at the site of the rupture not only between the present and the past but also, as he says, between labour and nature and between discourse and the social body. The shadows of the alterities thrown up by such rupture hover forever over history. History's desire of grappling with and eventually taming the alterity of the Other is seen by Certeau as akin to "calming the dead who still haunt the present and...offering them scriptural tombs" (1988, 3). For Certeau, narrative in historiography "inters" the dead in order to "exorcise" them. Further, narrative's "naming" of the dead, the other, the past, the body, signifies their *absence* in historiography. As Certeau puts it, "...the function of language is to introduce through *saying* what can no longer be done"(101, emphasis original). In other words *it is narrative or the language weave that makes-present what history considers as dead*. But narrative in history also has a pedagogical function, that of providing the social body a legitimate "present time".

Ambedkar's exhumation of the Buddhist past through a mythic re-creation partakes of both these gestures. What he "inters" – the past not-yet-dead-but-buried by the dominant Hindu-Aryan historiography – is also what he invests with the time of the "now" – the legitimate present time – that is willed to break free from what "was". It is not a past he wants to exorcise and lay to rest like Certeau's historian so that the homogeneous time of history can continue to flow. Nor does he like Michelet's historian treat resurrection as a metaphor and mourn for an irretrievably buried past^{xvi}. In blasting the Buddhist era out from the homogeneous course of Hindu Brahmanic history, Ambedkar is rather the quintessential Benjaminian revolutionary. He encounters the Buddhist period as "a configuration pregnant with tensions", as time filled by the presence of the "now" *Jetztzeit* – and as free from the oppression of a progression through a "homogeneous empty time" (Benjamin, 1969). He is not interested in historicizing Buddhism, in seeing it as merely one of the

several heterodox movements in ancient and medieval India that challenged the hegemony of Brahmanism. Like Benjamin's Robespierre who saw Ancient Rome as a past charged with the time of the "now", Ambedkar invests the Buddhist period in Indian history with the tensions, the revolutionary upheavals of the dalits at the time of the imagining of the new Indian nation. Through the *en masse* conversion of his community into Buddhism, Ambedkar erects and inaugurates, through exhumation and remembrance, the new Buddhist subject who would continue to challenge the oppressive continuum of Hindu-Aryan history.

What is interesting about Ambedkar's engagement with Indian historiography is that he does not substitute one authoritative text and history by another. Rather, his mythographies effect an internal dialogization of the authoritative historiographical mode itself. The Hindu Brahmanic appropriation of the language and rhetoric of bourgeois liberalism located India's national identity in, to quote Bakhtin, "that distanced zone, organically connected with a past that it felt to be hierarchically higher" (Bakhtin 1981, 342). Further, "it sought legitimacy in a hieratic language – Sanskrit – and attempted to fuse itself in an authority – caste – such that its truth-value, its salience, stood or fell with that authority" (Geetha 1993, 136). It is this appropriation and authority that Ambedkar seeks to challenge. His is not a comprehensive abjuration of modern historical consciousness. In fact, he sees colonial modernity as an event that could enable dalits to break with their hateful past, a past of brutal oppression at the hands of the caste Hindus. It is Enlightenment values that he has recourse to in challenging Brahmanic hegemony. But he very definitely wants to engage with modernity, both colonial and national, on his own terms. His attempts to do so can be seen in terms of what Dilip Gaonkar in writing on alternative modernities calls "creative adaptation":

Creative adaptation is not simply a matter of adjusting the form or recoding the practice to soften the impact of modernity; rather it points to the manifold ways in which people question the present. It is the site where people “make” themselves modern, as opposed to being “made” modern by alien and impersonal forces, and where they give themselves an identity and destiny... (16-17).

Ambedkar's is not merely an act of recuperating the historical “Buddha” from the debris to which the latter had been relegated by hegemonic histories. His is an act of political insurrection whereby he challenges the hypocrisy of the hierarchical Hindu society masquerading in postcolonial India in the garb of modernity. Indian modernity has, through his efforts, been rendered multivocal and less coercive. The “modern” in such discourse is not disavowed or negated; but it is seen as inevitably contested, in some sense even unsettled and not-at-home.

It is in this light that we need to read both his attempts to re-construct the genealogy of the *shudras* and the *ati-shudras* and his rewriting of Buddha's life and message. His attempts to trace the origin of the dalits in terms of pure presence were doomed from the beginning. He found too many narratives strewn in his path: the *Purushasukta* theory of Brahmanism, the race-invasion theory of his predecessor, Jotirao Phule, the materialist construction of the Marxist historians. His own construction of dalit genealogy was eventually “an unstable assemblage of faults, fissures and heterogenous layers” (Foucault 1984, *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*, 79). In his tracts, “Who Were the *Shudras*?” and “*Shudras* and the Counter- Revolution”, he dismissed the race theory of the early dalit activists such as Phule. Jotiba Phule had held that the *shudras* and the *ati-Shudras* were the original inhabitants of this land, later dispossessed and deterritorialized by the Aryan invaders. The racial divide ran deep, with the “dark”, “flat-nosed” non-Aryan relegated to the fringes of a

society now dominated by fair-skinned, swashbuckling conquerors. Ambedkar steered clear of this eugenic interpretation of the origin of the dalits:

As a matter of fact the caste system came into being long after the different races of India had co-mingled in blood and culture. To hold that distinctions of caste are really distinctions of race...is a gross perversion of facts. What racial affinity is there between the Brahman of Punjab and the Brahman of Madras? What racial affinity is there between the untouchables of Bengal and the untouchables of Madras? The caste system does not demarcate racial division. The Caste system is the social division of people of the same race (1987 Vol. I, 491).

In its place, however, he did not put forth one seamless narrative; rather, we see mythical fragments and broken histories. In one of his tracts, “*Shudras and the Counter-Revolution*”, he cited evidence from the *Vedas*, from the *Mahabharata* and from Kautilya’s *Arthashastra*, to claim that the dalits were originally Aryans and that they enjoyed all the privileges accorded to the upper-castes, including the right to be a monarch. It was only much later that internecine political conflict led to them being downgraded and disenfranchised (1987 Vol. III, 421).

Quite another story informed his conversion speech in Nagpur (1956). In it Ambedkar traced the genealogy of the Mahar community to the *Naga* tribes. The *Nagas*, according to him, were victims of an Aryan pogrom. Only one *Naga* managed to escape as Sage Agastya granted him refuge. The Mahars “sprang” from him. The *Nagas* later met Buddha, sought initiation into the Buddhist *Sangha* and were among the earliest Buddhists in Indian history. It was only much later that the Brahmanic ethos, in its triumph over Buddhism, trampled the *Naga*-Buddhists under its vicious code of untouchability. In the conversion ceremony the Mahars thus reclaimed their ancestral religion in the city of the *Nagas*, Nagpur. In Buddhist literature, however, there is quite another story about the

Nagas and their encounter with Buddhism. It is a story of excommunication and disgrace. As recounted in the *Vinaya Pitakam*,^{xvii} there was a *Naga* (in Indian mythology, a snake who can assume human form at will) who loathed his life as a serpent and saw entry into the Buddhist *Sangha* as a way toward leading a peaceful and chaste life as a human being. Among the many conditions that candidates for ordination had to fulfil was a strange one: they had to be human.^{xviii} The *Naga* in his desperation camouflaged his true identity and was granted full ordination. He had to share a cell at the edge of the monastery with another monk. One day he let his guard slip and fell asleep during which he assumed his real form. His deception came to light and the Buddha was swift in his retribution:

The Blessed One spoke to the monks: “Monks, there are two conditions in which the true nature of a *naga* becomes manifest: when he indulges in sexual intercourse with a female of his kind and when he falls asleep feeling certain he is safe [...] Monks, an animal who is not ordained should not be ordained, and one who is ordained by mistake should be expelled from the community (cited in Strong, 62).

In juxtaposing Ambedkar’s recounting of the tale of the *Nagas* with that drawn from sources in Buddhist literature, we see the operation of the dynamic of “forgetting” in recasting/recreating identities that Benedict Anderson spoke of. Ashis Nandy has also written about the importance of “principled forgetfulness” in the mythic engagement of the oppressed with their past and present (1983). This feature is but the flip side of the phenomenon of wilful remembering and together they allow the subaltern to radically define their own past – what Nandy, drawing on Jurgen Habermas’s phrase, “future-oriented memories”, calls “remembering in an anticipatory fashion” (58).

At the start of this section we spoke of two Ambedkars, one who pledged commitment to modernization and social scientific analysis and the other who sought recourse to myths,

parables and religion to articulate his vision of a new past for the dalits. The heterogeneity that marks his body of writing arises from a braiding of these two different orientations to the world. Except for his last work, The Buddha and his Dhamma, Ambedkar never really settled in favour of one over the other, though there are apocryphal stories about his repeated expression of disinterest in field-empiricism in the later years of his life. In fact, the dalit scholar, D.R. Nagaraj, has suggested that Ambedkar's turn to mythography in his later writings was a sign of his tiredness with social science modes of reasoning (1993, 58). Some of this fatigue is visible in his The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables? (1948). The generic liminality of this text can be seen in the way it veers between social scientific/historical analysis on the one hand and mythographic engagement with ancient Indian classical texts on the other. Ambedkar claims to undertake a meticulously documented study of the origins of untouchability, a study he says Brahmanical scholars have shied away from for it demanded of them a soul searching they had no intention of undertaking and an intellectual honesty they did not possess. The gap between his intention to carry out a meticulous secular-historical analysis of the origins of untouchability and his realization that the methodology of social science does not quite lend itself to such analysis is expressed in his Preface. He begins by quoting Goethe on the duty of a historian:

The historian's duty is to separate the true from the false, the certain from the uncertain and the doubtful from that which cannot be accepted.... Every investigator must before all things look upon himself as one who is summoned to serve on a jury. He has only to consider how far the treatment of the case is complete and clearly set forth by the evidence. Then he draws his conclusion and gives his vote (6).

He then speculates on the efficacy of these scientific protocols of modern historiography in examining the antiquated origins of untouchability. In his reading of the ancient texts on

caste and untouchability he finds many “missing links” (6), so many that, as he says, a historian committed to positivistic readings – verifiability – would find it almost impossible to make a full case for any one hypothesis about the origins of untouchability. Ambedkar, however, is determined to go on with his project. In the process we see him struggling to slough off his social scientific skin and don an interpretive/hermeneutic one. He talks of supplementing a rational analysis of facts with an imaginative and intuitive descent into textual digs so as to ferret out traces and remnants in the manner of an archeologist. In talking of the process of reassembling these traces from antiquity and building a narrative, he compares his labour to that of the creative artist who fashions his material not so much with scientific precision and linearity in mind as with imaginative and intuitive leaps into a recursive, metaphorical domain:

The present attempt to explain the origin of untouchability is not the same as writing history from texts which speak with certainty. It is a case of reconstructing history where there are no texts, and if there are, they have no direct bearing on the question. In such circumstances what one has to do is to strive to divine what the texts conceal or suggest.... The task is one of gathering survivals of the past, placing them together and making them tell the story of their birth. That task is analogous to that of the archeologist who constructs a city from broken stones...or of a painter who reads the lines of the horizon and the smallest vestiges on the slopes of the hill to make up a scene. *In this sense the book is a work of art even more than of history* (7, emphasis added).

After expressing his misgivings about the extent to which the narrative of the origins of untouchability is/is not amenable to the protocols of verifiable historiography, Ambedkar does not exactly plunge headlong into the domain of the mythic and the literary. His rhetoric continues to be that of the social scientist, but one on the defensive, apologizing for the speculations, polemics and imaginative linkages with which the text abounds. The final impression we have of the book is one in which a puffed, worn out social scientism appears to have swum its last leg and is on the verge of being swamped by a tidal wave

from an archival past that will brook no unequivocal, structured attempts to channel its flow along safe, rational, utility-dictated directions. In the section that follows, I turn to Ambedkar's *magnum opus*, The Buddha and his Dhamma, where Ambedkar's ambivalence regarding the efficacy of social scientific/secular historical analysis of the dalit past appears to have been resolved in favour of a mythographic register. I then undertake a brief analysis of the phenomenon of Ambedkar-Buddha worship among the new Mahar converts in Maharashtra. Both these readings are, as we shall see, in keeping with my theoretical concerns about the new political articulated in terms of a heterogeneous, textual-temporal braiding.

Buddha, Bhakti and Superstition

I begin this section with a caveat. In my reading of The Buddha and his Dhamma, I do not recount those aspects of the text and the circumstances surrounding its origin that have already been analyzed in much detail since its publication in 1957. These include Ambedkar's political battles with Indian nationalist leaders, his twenty-year struggle to find the right religion to convert to, his extensive readings of the archive of Buddhism, the details of his divergence from orthodox Buddhism, the description of the conversion ceremony in Nagpur, the parallels of the text with other works from the European liberal tradition such as those of J.S. Mill and readings that attempt to situate his work within other attempts at revival of Buddhism in the modern age. I am more interested in foregrounding those aspects of the text that I see as talking to my concerns in this chapter about certain ways of dwelling in modernity that are not amenable either to secular-historicist readings of the past or to questions about human oppression restricted to the domain of the national-political alone.

One of the most common readings, and one by no means invalid, of Ambedkar's last major work on the life and teachings of Buddha, The Buddha and his Dhamma (1957), sees it as a treatise documenting the culmination of Ambedkar's tryst with modernity. The text is seen as a rationalized biography of the Buddha and one intimately connected with Ambedkar's project of socio-cultural reconstruction of Indian society. In a classic case of what Hayden White has called "emplotment" (1978), Ambedkar is seen to have placed facts found in the Buddha chronicle so as to foreground not so much the Buddha of ancient India as Buddhism as an ideology that responded best to the needs of modern India. As a doctrine that made social welfare its primary goal, Buddhism could hardly be bettered. Even Marxism came second to it. Further, its emphasis on rationality, the materiality of things, its disavowal of God and soul, and its anti-hierarchical stand on social organization, all made it conducive to ideological adoption by the oppressed untouchables. As Macy and Zelliott put it, Ambedkar's "reversioning of the Buddhist past relates to the life situation of the converts" (1980, 138).

Scholars such as Eleanor Zelliott and Gail Omvedt have read The Buddha and his Dhamma and Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in terms of liberation theology – religions of the oppressed – which they see as an inalienable aspect of the experience of coming into modernity among the oppressed around the world. Earlier we saw Gail Omvedt reading the Ambedkarite movement – which, of course, includes his sustained engagement with Buddhism – solely in terms of a democratic revolution. Such readings have appealed to (and been endorsed by) intellectuals, poets and activists from among the Mahar converts who desire nothing more than to situate the dalit movement alongside other twentieth century revolutionary movements for equality and justice around the world. As Jayashree Gokhale-Turner puts it:

The world revolutionary tradition, especially in its socialist forms, seems to have infused [sic] the consciousness of many *dalit* poets. There are often references to Marx, Lenin, Mao Zedong, Che Guevara, Lenin, Ho Chi Minh, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X.... *Dalit* writers seem to place themselves within the world revolutionary literary tradition, which provides them with a wider frame of reference and, at the same time, replaces the Indian tradition from which they have already declared their separation (1981, 37).

This desire on the part of the dalit poets to sever connections with what they call the Indian tradition and to seek out a new present has led them, as it has those scholars from the discipline of the Social Sciences who are sympathetic to the cause of dalit revolution, to interpret Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism and his Buddhist tracts in disjunctive terms, as symbolizing a total break with non-modern ways of engaging with the world. What such reading does, in other words, is to create an Ambedkar who heroizes the present, who, in other words, desires nothing more than to have his fellow untouchables indoctrinated into a new present that promises to continually renew itself.

I am not suggesting that this reading is erroneous. As we saw earlier, there is enough evidence from Ambedkar's politically active life and his writings to warrant such a reading. However, in keeping with the deconstructive logic of the supplement that I have used throughout this chapter, I would argue that such a reading leaves out those aspects of Ambedkar's discursive engagement with the Indian tradition and with Buddhism in particular that constantly interrupts his own attitude of total disjunction towards the past. It is in this sense that I speak of two Ambedkars, that is, not in the sense of two who contradict or negate or nullify each other, but as two that constantly interrupt any attempt to erect an Ambedkar in terms of One. One could, if one wanted to, recast my analysis in terms formulated by Homi Bhabha and say that the Ambedkar I am talking about, the

Ambedkar who studied under Dewey in Columbia and drafted the Indian constitution, and the Ambedkar who wrote his mythographies and The Buddha and His Dhamma, is “less-than-one-and-double” (1994). Readings that unproblematically cast Ambedkar either in the role of a revolutionary – out to comprehensively reject the past and search for a true secular present – or in the role of a reactionary – harking back to religion, mythology and such other non-modern ways of relating to the world – miss the complexity, the heterogeneity, of his many takes on the issue of caste and untouchability in modern India. It is only when questions relating to caste are raised in excess of the notion of social justice, when we do not reduce every statement made about caste to the discourse of policy and amelioration, when we open our minds to the many ways in which human beings comport with what are ideologically unjust institutions and practices – caste and patriarchy to cite but two instances – that we can begin to theorize such heterogeneity, such manifoldness, as we encounter in Ambedkar’s writings. In a later part of this section when I look into the religious practices of the neo-Buddhists or the Mahar converts, it is precisely this notion of heterogeneity that I invoke, a notion that enables me to emerge with a conception of the dalit movement that both is and is not revolutionary.

Let me now turn to those aspects of The Buddha and His Dhamma and Ambedkarite Buddhism that open up for me ways of reading not reducible to secular-modernist interpretations. The most obvious aspect, of course, that such interpretations displace is the role of religious faith in Ambedkarite Buddhism. This point has been advanced by at least two scholars of Ambedkar’s conversion movement – Valerian Rodrigues (1993) and Gauri Vishwanathan (1998). Ambedkar’s foregrounding of Buddha’s atheism, his rationality, his rejection of Hindu soteriology, his rejection of hierarchy, have in most social science analyses been seen as evidence of Ambedkar’s desire to transcend religiosity *per se* and

seek recourse in modern institutions and practices of democracy and governance. Vishwanathan, as we saw earlier, critiqued such secular readings of Ambedkar's conversion. Rodrigues too writes about the limitations of a secular, social scientific reading of events such as religious conversions (301) and interprets Ambedkar's attempts to recast dalit identity in Buddhist terms as an exercise in "critical traditionalism". Ambedkar in such reading is seen not so much to comprehensively reject ancient Hindu metaphysical concepts such as *nirvana*, *dharma*, *ahimsa* and *karma*, as to shake the dust off their heavy, other worldly, philosophical backs and make them speak to the urgency of human dilemmas in the present.

It is my contention, however, that even such sensitive, reflexive readings do not, in the final analysis, escape the stranglehold of normative modernity that I have spoken of as being pervasive in academia. Rodrigues recounts in great detail Ambedkar's reworking of the tenets of Buddhism in The Buddha and his Dhamma. But he ends up reading it as an exercise in ideology, an exercise that, in the final analysis, merely shores up the foundations of Indian liberalism:

Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism placed the untouchable-cum-Buddhist, ideologically, into a radical and liberal political framework. He also provided a major social base for the liberal political ethos and institutions put together after independence in India. By co-opting elements of Marxism into his ideological perspective, while criticizing its failure to provide a comprehensive ideological perspective, he reinforced the shallow foundations of Indian liberalism, while at the same time placing before it a radical agenda (338).

As for Vishwanathan, she does talk of how conversion restores "belief from the margins of secular society to a more worldly function" (xvi), but her interpretation of "worldly" is purely pedagogical, articulated in terms of liberal discourse: "The worldliness I have in

mind relates to civil and political rights" (xvi). This is what eventually makes her limit her reading of the significance of Ambedkar's conversion to the domain of the national-political alone:

If Ambedkar exhorted untouchables to leave Hinduism for cultural self-renewal, he conceived of that departure not as a withdrawal into an autonomous space but as a prerequisite to reclaiming India as the nation from which untouchables had been severed by political disenfranchisement (238-9).

I cannot emphasize enough that such readings are not faulty. It is only that they do not open out toward a phenomenology of *faith* by which I mean a certain orientation of the human to God and to the non-secular that is not underpinned by conscious thought and political-cultural calculations in the first instance.

It is, I argue, such orientation of the human to the non-secular that Ambedkar manifests when he writes about the Buddha. It may seem a startling claim at first glance, given Ambedkar's comprehensive rejection of God and the supernatural in the text. But I base my argument on two facts. The first is a statement Ambedkar himself made about the language he wanted to deploy in The Buddha and his *Dhamma*. The second is the mythographic narrative form of Ambedkar's text itself. The second, of course, follows from the first. Let us first consider the following statement of Ambedkar's. It was made in an article called "Buddha and the Future of his Religion", published in 1950 in Mahabodhi, a well-known journal devoted to Buddhist writings. In that article Ambedkar expressed his desire and determination to write a life of the Buddha that would circulate not as just another biography of the great reformer, but as a kind of *ur-text*, a Bible to his fellow converts among the Mahar community. He also added that his work would need to take

care about the “language” that is used. What interests me is his elaboration on the type of language he wanted to use:

It must make the language in which it is produced *live*. It must become an *incantation*, instead of being read as an ethical exposition. Its style must be lucid, *moving* and must produce a *hypnotic* effect (204, emphasis added).

The terms “incantation”, “moving” and “hypnotic” go completely against the grain of Ambedkar’s scientific/rationalistic claims in The Buddha and his Dhamma. As any number of analyses of The Buddha and His Dhamma show, Ambedkar’s *ressentiment* towards Hindu religion and its soteriology goes so far that he spares no effort to comprehensively strip his narrative of all traces that might suggest any form of continuity with the non-secular aspects of Hindu tradition. Let me illustrate this point with the help of three examples from the text:

- The first is the central importance he accords to Buddha’s rejection of the following four theses of Hindu Brahmanic philosophy: a) sanctity and infallibility of the Vedas b) salvation of the soul or escape from transmigration by performing Vedic sacrifices c) *Chaturvarna* or four-fold division of castes by birth and occupation as blueprint for an ideal society d) *Karma* or the importance of deeds in previous lives to account for one’s present state. Through his rejection of these four principles the Buddha is shown to base his teachings in the domain of the earthly and the human. His is also a rejection of the idea of “revealed religion”.
- The second is Ambedkar’s scientific/materialist recasting of key terms that the Buddha is known to have taken from Hindu philosophy, terms such as *karma*, *dharma* and *nirvana*. The Buddhist texts in Pali refer to these Sanskrit terms as *kamma*, *dhamma* and *nibbana* respectively. Ambedkar’s interpretation of these terms is

painstakingly secular and disenchanted. Thus, *kamma* does not refer to the impact of the actions of previous lives on the present one. The idea of reincarnation is rejected in favour of an idea of rebirth that is simply seen in terms of the disintegration of the body into five basic elements – fire, earth, air, water and ether – and their reintegration to form another body. *Dhamma* is not rule of law that has divine sanction but is just social morality concerned only with man and his life on earth and a commitment to alleviation of human suffering. Likewise, *nibbana* is not release of the soul from transmigration but control over passions in this earthly life so as to enable one to walk the path of righteousness.

- My third example comes from Ambedkar's outlining of the four stages that the Buddha went through in order to reach Enlightenment. They are: a) Reason and Investigation b) Concentration c) Equanimity and Mindfulness d) Purity. Valerian Rodrigues points out that Ambedkar's account of these four stages is drawn not so much from Buddhist texts as from the rationalist philosopher Rene Descartes' A Discourse of Method (315).

Ambedkar himself writes in the text, "Buddhism is nothing if not rationalism" (175) and as if to back up his view that Buddhism is the method of rational investigation embodied, in his "Epilogue" he cites several scientists who have celebrated the scientific spirit and temper of Buddhism. To illustrate this I use just one such statement made by an Indian scientist, Dr. Ranjan Bose: "Science has proved that the course of the Universe is a grouping and dissolution and regrouping.... Modern Science is the echoing of the Buddhist doctrines of transitoriness (*annica*) and egolessness (*anatta*)" (597).

It is, thus, very intriguing that when Ambedkar talks of the kind of language that would best suit his project, he invokes the kind of language that promotes not rational thought but

suspension of disbelief and the *mnemonic*, as the terms “hypnotic” and “incantation” from his quote indicate. He then goes on to write The Buddha and his Dhamma by drawing on the style and rhetoric of myths, legends and other discourses of revealed religion. In doing so, I would argue, Ambedkar *makes present* the language of faith as orientation of the human to the non-secular or the divine that the logic of his text purports to deny. A cruder way of putting it would be to suggest that Ambedkar rejects the transcendental Hindu Godhead and erects in its place another God – the Buddha as the fount of Rationality – by which he wants his fellow converts to be *spell-bound*. In writing The Buddha and his Dhamma in “moving”, “hypnotic” language, Ambedkar partakes of (and wants his readers/fellow converts to partake of as well) the gestures that belong to a set of non-mentalist – in a Heideggerian ready-to-hand way – practices seeking contact with the divine. Among such practices in Hindu religion, the one most written about is that of *darshan* (literally *sight*) which can be described as the experience of seeing the divine when it is manifest in the form of an icon or an image. Inherent in this practice is an element of wonder – the Hindi word is *vismaya* – that precedes/ transcends understanding. John Stratton Hawley in his essay, “Krishna in Black and White: *Darsan* in Butter Thief Poems of the early *Sur Sagar*”, captures this experience well:

Indian eyes silently search out the inner meanings of a guru’s face for hours on end; crowds in the street push and shove to see the great pass by; babies are held aloft to absorb the blessings that visual contact with a revered figure or icon can bring, even if the understanding is not mature enough to comprehend; villagers unable to name the images in temples nonetheless stand transfixed before them: *the sight itself suffices*. And icons of Krishna are sometimes clothed, jewelled and garlanded afresh eight times a day, in part to retain the wonder that comes with the sight of the god (1981, 43, emphasis added).

Ambedkar's deification of the Rational Buddha calls forth a way of being and a dimension of reality that the disenchanting prose of the social sciences and scholarly exposition in general cannot make present. Herein lies the significance of the mythographic form of Ambedkar's presentation of Buddha's life and message, full of tales and parables of encounters of ordinary people whose lives were transformed by the Buddha's touch.

I also suggest that it is not mere oversight on Ambedkar's part or an inconsistency in the text that he literally calls forth the supernatural (a gesture he would otherwise call superstitious) at two significant moments in the narrative, one relating to Buddha's birth and the other to a manifestation of his Enlightened state. In both cases Ambedkar falls back on the language of faith as he comes face to face with the inadequacy of disenchanting logic in representing the divine and wondrous spirit of the Buddha. Thus, we see – have a vision of, a *darshan* of – albeit through the divine eyes of the great sage Asita, the gods in heaven rejoicing over the birth of the Buddha: “He beheld them waving their garments and coursing hither and thither in delight” (5). Asita makes his way from his ascetic domain in the Himalayas to the kingdom of Gautama's father, Shuddhodana, to see the newborn. He not only notes that the infant is “endowed with the thirty-two marks of a great man and adorned with the eighty minor marks, his body surpassing that of *Sakra*, *Brahma* and his aura surpassing them a hundred-thousandth fold” (6), but also makes his famous prediction that the child would be the Enlightened One, the Buddha. The second incident in which the supernatural manifests itself relates to Buddha's display of *Karuna* or Compassion after he reached Enlightenment. Here the Buddha is seen to tend to the diseased, loathsome body of a mendicant whom the rest of the world, including the other Bhikkus, had shunned. The awesome, divine nature of his Compassion is conveyed by Ambedkar in non-secular terms: “Then the earth shook, and the whole place was filled with a supernatural light, so that the

king and the ministers, and all the heavenly host (*Devas, Nagas, etc.*), flocked to the place, and paid adoration to the Buddha” (297).

It is not surprising, then, that scholars like Omvedt, Verma, Keer, and others – who, as social scientists, invest purely in a secular-historicist notion of the political – are wary of Ambedkar’s preoccupation with the dalits’ Buddhist past and the issue of religious conversion in the last two decades of his life. They can, as we have seen, theorize about the religious way of worlding (worlding by faith) only in two ways, either in instrumentalist terms (in this sense it is not worlding by faith at all), that is, as an adjunct to political activism and bargaining – which is also in some ways the cornerstone of religious fundamentalism in our present times – or in historicist terms as reactionary or retrogressive, in short as pre-modern. But as I have argued throughout this chapter, any attempt to study caste in terms of the social scientific “true present”, cannot but obscure other ways of comporting with caste – and by this I do not mean a fatalistic resignation to its oppressive dimension – that we see in the life-worlds of South Asians. What I am talking about is the domain of practice (or *habitus*, as Bourdieu called it) that draws on heterogeneous, non-commensurable ways of being in the world, and that is not underpinned by any one ideology or doctrine or political philosophy. In the previous chapter we saw the historian, Gyan Prakash, drawing precisely on this notion of practice to inform his reading of the agency of the supernatural in the lives of the untouchable bonded labourers in eastern Bihar.

It is only by drawing on this notion of practice that I can begin to read the various manifestations of Ambedkarite Buddhism in Maharashtra without the trepidation or misgivings expressed by Omvedt and other social scientists. These manifestations partake

of idioms from modes of worship that Ambedkar and the Mahars otherwise denounce, such as *Bhakti*, for instance, or from orthodox Buddhist soteriology that Ambedkar did not deploy in The Buddha and his Dhamma. Timothy Fitzgerald, who has undertaken extensive ethnographic research among the Mahar Buddhists and who is concerned with the various forms that Ambedkarite Buddhism has taken in Maharashtra, notes, among other things, the formation of a Buddhist soteriological organization called *Trailokya Bauddha, Mahasangha Sahayak Gana* (TBMSG). The organization is based in Pune and attempts to combine the teachings of Ambedkar and that of the well-known English Buddhist *bhikkhu*, Sangarakshita. Sangarakshita had a very close association with Ambedkar and after Ambedkar's death in 1956, founded a centre for Buddhist studies in Nagpur, the city where the conversion took place. The TBMSG aims to shore up Ambedkar's rationalized interpretation of Buddha's life and message with the more soteriological understanding of the Buddhism of Sangharakshita. It does so by "accepting that key Buddhist terms such as *dhamma...nirvana...karuna...Bodhisattva...moksa...* are multivalent or have gradations of legitimate meaning" (Fitzgerald 233). In a footnote Fitzgerald adds that Sangharakshita objected to the use of the term "modernist" to describe the religious orientation of TBMSG for the term connoted a break with the past, and the belief-system of TBMSG was about *both continuity and disjunction* with Buddha's teachings as found in more orthodox Buddhist texts (233).

In another study documenting yet another manifestation of Ambedkarite Buddhism, Jayashree B. Gokhale-Turner (1981) writes of the deification of Ambedkar by Mahar converts in the manner of the *bhakti* saint-poets of medieval India. It is a fact well known that the dalit political movement in Maharashtra, unlike many other twentieth century anti-caste movements, refused to draw inspiration from the *bhakti* idiom of protest against caste

discrimination. In its final act of subservience to the will of God such an idiom was seen as conformist and anti-revolutionary. Ambedkar himself repeatedly denounced the tameness of the *bhakti* register of protest and especially criticized other Mahar attempts to claim descent and derive inspiration from the Mahar *bhakti* poet of the fourteenth century, Chokhamela. Twenty years before he actually led the Mahar community to conversion, Ambedkar appealed to the Mahars to cast off labels that would remind them of submission to and patronage of the upper caste Hindus:

If someone asks you what your caste is, you say you are a *Chokhamela* or a *Harijan*; but you do not say you are a Mahar.... But there is no meaning in adopting a name like *Chokhamela* or *Harijan*. The stench of the old name will stick to the new and you will be forced to change your name continually. Then why not change it permanently?^{xix}

In this he clashed with another Mahar leader, Kisan Fagu Bansode, who had in the nineteen-twenties, before the rise of Ambedkar as the dalit leader, sought inspiration from the *bhakti* tradition in Maharashtra. We know that Bansode considered Pandharpur a place of pilgrimage for the Mahars, that he collected the *abhangas*^{xx} of Chokhamela and that he even wrote a play on Chokhamela's life (Zelliot, 10). Ambedkar, of course, had other plans for mobilizing the Mahars. In fact, as we shall see in the following chapter where I discuss Marathi dalit writing, the literary movement that emerged in Maharashtra in the late sixties following the conversion of the Mahar community to Buddhism, refused to trace its antecedents to the writings of the fourteenth century Mahar *bhakti* poet, Chokhamela.

But as Gokhale-Turner (1981), Indira Jhungare (1988), Eleanor Zelliot(1992), Timothy Fitzgerald (1997) and others, including Arun Shourie (1996) in his infamous book, Worshipping False Gods, point out, the worship of Ambedkar and the Buddha in the *bhakti* mode is a common phenomenon, especially in rural Maharashtra. Ambedkar's injunctions

against rituals, worship of godheads, and belief in the supernatural doesn't seem to have had the effect he desired. Fitzgerald, in his essay "Ambedkar Buddhism in Maharashtra", writes that when the Mahar Buddhists are asked to articulate what the Ambedkar variant of Buddhism means to them, they talk in the non-transcendental or secular idiom of liberalism: "When asked about the most valuable thing Dr. Ambedkar gave to the Buddhists, six of them quoted the slogan 'educate, organize, agitate' which is taken from a speech which Ambedkar made to the All India Depressed Classes Conference in 1942" (230). Buddhism to these new converts, Fitzgerald adds, "means equality, human dignity, self-help and self-reliance, rejection of caste and inequality, rejection of reliance on supernatural agencies, acceptance of scientific rationality, of the value of modern education, of democracy, of the rights of the individual" (231). But as Fitzgerald's ethnography on Mahar Buddhist practices show, these views do not prevent them from actively participating in many Hindu festivals and rituals. He describes in great detail their participation in *Nagapanchami* (festival commemorating snake deities) and in (what in South Asian anthropological parlance is called) *kadak* rituals, that is, the "worship of dangerous non-vegetarian deities such as the cholera goddess *Mariyai* whose shrine is in the scheduled caste section of the village" (235). Such *kadak* worship usually involves tough and gory rituals^{xxi} involving blood-offerings, meat-eating, self-inflicted violence, both actual and symbolic, such as whipping, daubing the face and body with vermilion and lemon juice and drinking of hard liquor (247). Fitzgerald and Zelliott also describe the rituals that have grown around avowedly Buddhist modes of worship: temples akin to those devoted to Hindu deities have been built with images and idols of the Buddha and Ambedkar, the birth anniversaries of both are treated as sacred days, devotional and folk songs dedicated to Ambedkar and the Buddha have proliferated since the conversion. Indira Jhungare, from whose work I draw on in the next chapter, has collected many Mahar

folksongs that treat Ambedkar both as a personalized God and the Supreme deity, omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. To cite one such song:

Bhima is overhead, Bhima is beneath
 Bhima is in front, Bhima is behind.
 Oh my friend, nothing is here without him
 He is everywhere, he is everywhere.^{xxii}

One cannot but read into these, as Gokhale-Turner and others have done, modes of worship that are akin to those of *bhakti* and hence those that do not exactly signal a disjunction with the past as Ambedkar had hoped his Buddhism would do.

My reading of the presence of *bhakti* in Ambedkarite Buddhism, however, differs in a very significant way from that of the social anthropologists mentioned above. They see the religious practices of the Mahar Buddhists as very much part of the overall process of modernization of caste, a position articulated, as we saw in chapter one, by sociologists Rudolph and Rudolph in their landmark book, The Modernity of Tradition: Political Developments in India. Thus Gokhale-Turner writes:

The uses of *bhakti*...have changed; now it is to be used to destroy that very tradition within which it was moored, and to create a new culture in many ways antithetical to the old. In this manner, *a traditional idea may serve both to overthrow tradition and as an agent of modernization* (39, emphasis added).

Fitzgerald, too, interprets the Mahar Buddhist participation in *kadak* rituals and their *bhakti*-like worship of Ambedkar and Buddha in secular, pragmatic terms, as insurance against natural and man-made calamities. There have been other sociological studies of *bhakti* that have attempted to translate its purported anti-hierarchical, humanistic ideals into the idiom of modernization. One such study has been undertaken by K. Ishvaran, who attempts to read into the *Lingayat* religious practices of Karnataka modes of living that

facilitate modernization. As he says in his essay, “*Bhakti* Tradition and Modernization: The Case of *Lingayatism*” (1981),

The ideological system worked out by Basavanna and his immediate followers shows that it constitutes a system of ideas in which the individual, his freedom and his rationality are defined within a communitarian and egalitarian context. This ideological structure became the basis of the first major effort in Karnataka to establish a society based on what may be characterized as modernistic values (79-80).

These anthropologists, unlike Omvedt and Verma, are not uneasy about the religious dimension of the Ambedkarite movement. That is because they secularize it and read it as an attempt on Ambedkar’s part to mobilize religion and other cultural arsenal from the past for the cause of modernization. This is also how social scientists and other secular intellectuals such as Nehru, for instance, have attempted to explain the impact of Mahatma Gandhi’s spiritual/religious experiments on nationalist politics. Rudolph and Rudolph call Gandhi one of the “most conspicuous modernizers of Indian politics”, as one who knew that certain elements of tradition could *serve* modern functions (157). They too translate the element of *bhakti*, which was a crucial aspect of Gandhi’s orientation to the world,^{xxiii} into the language of democracy and modern politics. Even Ranajit Guha, who as we saw formulated a way of interpreting the domain of power and politics in South Asia that would resist both secular-historicist readings of India’s past and the paradigm of modernization, is unable, in the final analysis, to theorize *bhakti* in terms other than that of the secular and the sociological. He does not, however, talk of the democratic potential of *bhakti*. Rather, *Bhakti* he says, “is an ideology of subordination *par excellence*” (1997, 49).

Again, I am not suggesting that such readings are erroneous. However, in keeping with the line of argument I have pursued in this chapter, there are two points I would like to make

that could put forward a different reading of the prevalence of the idiom of *bhakti* and other Hindu rituals in Ambedkarite Buddhism and in modern Indian politics. First, I would suggest that such translation of particular non-secular experiences into universal sociological categories cannot but leave out the dimension of dwelling in faith that I spoke of early in this section – a dimension that is singular, phenomenological and that exceeds readings of caste and religion restricted to the domain of the national-political. When the Mahar-Buddhists participate in *bhakti* modes of worship, when they pay obeisance to Ambedkar and the Buddha, or even when Ambedkar uses the hypnotic, moving register of mythography and revealed religion to write about the Buddha, they do not have modernization of caste in mind (or, for that matter, the impact of caste on nation-building) though that may well be one of the transformations they effect on caste at the level of modern democratic politics. What they do is partake of a range of practices from their *habitus* – practices sedimented over time and ones they are oriented to in their day-to-day living – that enable them to connect with the divine. The logic of Ambedkar’s atheistic injunction to his fellow Mahars to abjure the domain of God and the supernatural does not impinge on such practice. This takes me to my second point and that is, that such a reading of faith enables one to talk about dalit ways of belonging in this world that cannot be encapsulated in the monolithic framework of revolution which demands a total break with the past. The activist desire of a “true present” for the dalit, a present wiped clean of *all* traces from an ignominious past, is bound to be interrupted by singularities of dalit dwelling that *make present* the past in ways not amenable to left-liberal academic theorizing or to the discourse of nation-building. In the two final chapters that follow, I invoke the literary and the aesthetic as modes better suited than the social sciences to address precisely this phenomenon of heterogeneity-in-dwelling or the co-existence of such multiple ways of belonging as we see among the dalits in South Asia.

ⁱ The term is Ashis Nandy's. See his Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism, (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1983), 15.

ⁱⁱ I use the term "non-modern" in the sense it is used in the Subaltern Studies project to connote practices which cannot be entirely subsumed under the rubric of western modernity. Subaltern Studies consciously abjures the use of the term "pre-modern" to account for the same, for the prefix "pre" invariably connotes historicist readings that SS sets out to critique.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hannah Arendt interestingly suggests that this notion of the "pre-political" as something that characterizes non-European practices (among others) goes back to Greek thought. As she puts it, "To be political, to live in a *polis*, meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence. In Greek self-understanding, to force people by violence, to command rather than persuade, were pre-political ways to deal with people characteristic of life outside the *polis*, of home and family life, where the household head ruled with uncontested, despotic powers, or *of life in the barbarian empires of Asia, whose despotism was frequently likened to the organization of the household*". Arendt Hannah, "The Public and the Private Realm", The Human Condition, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 26-27, emphasis added.

^{iv} Chakrabarty quotes one such instance of anxiety in Marx's writing: "And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language". "Epilogue: Reason and the Critique of Historicism", Provincializing Europe, 245.

^v It is radical because it is an "impossibility" that is not just one that can be *empirically* proven, but one that is inherent in the "discursive textile", the language-weave of the passage itself. The phrase "discursive textile" is Spivak's. See "The Politics of Translation", Outside in the Teaching Machine, (London: Routledge, 1993), 184.

^{vi} "Derrida disputes that any *meaning-intention* can ever be wholly absorbed in the *fulfilling intention*, can ever be congruent with it, can ever melt away into it" (Habermas, 175, emphasis added)

^{vii} Cited in Zelliott, "The Folklore of Pride: Three Components of Contemporary Dalit Belief", From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on Ambedkar Movement, (Delhi: Manohar, 1992), 317.

^{viii} Cited in Dhananjay Keer, Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission, (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1962, 2nd ed.), 218.

^{ix} Cited in Zelliott, 192.

^x See also the Marxist Dalit Panther poet-activist, Namdeo Dhasal's position which reads Ambedkar's conversion as a ruse/strategy to mobilize the common man: "Conversion to Buddhism...freed the Scheduled Castes from mental and psychological enslavement.... Religion (has) an attraction for the common man and it is not easy to change his attitude toward it", (cited in Zelliott, 219).

^{xi} Cited in Zelliott, 238.

^{xii} The term is Dipesh Chakrabarty's. See his reference to sociological and non-sociological modes of translation in "Translating Life-Worlds into Labour and History", Provincializing Europe, 72-96.

^{xiii} See Lata Murugkar, 1991, and Zelliott, 1992.

^{xiv} Note here the rhetorical gesture of Ambedkar invoking the modern distinction between myth and history to denounce Hindu-Aryan historiographical representation and then seeking to deconstruct that distinction through his own exhumation of the figure of the Buddha and the Buddhist phase in ancient Indian history.

^{xv} Marcos Natalie cites a section from Roland Barthes' Michelet, Trans. Richard Howard, (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987) where we are told that "Michelet had corpses of his first wife and father exhumed, had his uncle's body scarified and was himself terrified of being buried alive. His fear as he explained it was not that those who had been buried would somehow come back to life, but, rather, that they might not have died before they were buried" (Natalie, diss. University of Chicago, 13).

^{xvi} See Natalie, unpublished dissertation, Ch 4, p.14, University of Chicago, 2000.

^{xvii} Translated and edited by Hermann Oldenberg, (London: Williams and Norgate, 1879), 1: 86-87. See John S. Strong, The Experience of Buddhism: Sources and Interpretation, (Belmont California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1995), 61-62.

^{xviii} In an explanatory note, Strong in his preface to the story writes: "In ancient India, where belief in the ability of deities, dead spirits and supernatural beings of various sorts to take on human form was widespread, this rule made good sense, and to this day, in South and Southeast Asia, candidates are routinely asked as part of the ritual preliminaries for higher ordination, the intriguing question 'Are you a human being?'" (61).

^{xix} The Depressed Classes: A Chronological Documentation, (Kurseong: St. Mary's College 1930), 103.

^{xx} Devotional poems written to a particular rhythm. The term literally means "inviolable or unbroken".

^{xxi} The word "*kadak*" means "tough" in Marathi.

^{xxii} Translated by Jhungare (1988), p 101. The term Bhima comes from Ambedkar's first name, Bhimrao.

^{xxiii} As witness his statement that he found man's instinctive urge to worship admirable, or that much as he was embarrassed by the phenomenon of having to give *darshan* to his followers, he could not but believe that it expressed "in worldly terms some measure of other-worldly approbation, that it was a sign of grace" (Rudolph and Rudolph, 230).

CHAPTER SEVEN

OF URBAN DYSTOPIAS AND NEW GODS READINGS FROM MARATHI DALIT LITERATURE

The anarchy of emptiness never tempts me, even when it is resorted to as a temporary measure. I am frightened of an abstraction which is ready to ignore living reality.

Rabindranath Tagore

Comportment, not Revolution

See this row of sunsets in the cracks of my eyes
Tell me how to live if at each moment one dies,
In this decisive darkness I seek for words, brother...

Yashwant Manoharⁱ

Brother, our screams are only an attempt
To write the chronicle of this country
- this naked country
with its heartless religion.

Bapurao Jagtapⁱⁱ

Both these poetic evocations from the *oeuvre* of Marathi dalit literature constitute the *cri de coeur* of dalits in contemporary India. The second, however, with its attempt to situate dalit poetry as protest against the excesses of the Hindu religion and the latter's hegemonic hold on Indian nationhood, is the more frequently heard voice of dalitness in *public* debates on caste in India. Its lament is collective and it is what powers dalit-bahujan social and political activism in the nation today. In fact, the term "lament", perhaps, dilutes the revolutionary fervour of such poetry, for it aims at nothing short of a complete overhauling of the socio-cultural fabric of India. It desires to annihilate the past that it thinks was unmitigatedly oppressive for the untouchable castes and seeks to fashion for them a new

present in terms of a broadly liberal democratic framework. This is poetry that is avowedly militant and political in its quest for social justice and it sees social transformation as its ultimate goal. To that extent it is in tune with the modernizing aspirations of both nationalists and social scientists. It too desires to “kill” caste as the latter is seen to exist in its “pre-modern” hierarchical avatar.

Yashwant Manohar’s lines also evoke the gloom of caste-based oppression, but it registers such oppression not in a tone of revolutionary anger that threatens to set an unjust social world aflame, but in a tone of anguish that goes to the very heart of the human condition. In desiring to seek ways of being alive and creative amidst suffering and death-like despair, these lines allow us a glimpse of what comportment is all about. Comportment is not quietism or a resigned acceptance of one’s place in an unjust world order. It is rather an orientation toward all that is life giving in a slippery, treacherous, aggressive, sorrowful, oppressive, unjust world. It points to truths that are larger than the pedagogical truths of either the social sciences or those of political activism. In the context of the realities of being a dalit in contemporary India, Manohar’s stance on oppression can be a metonym for ways in which dalits comport with caste and untouchability in their everyday lives, ways that exceed the revolutionizing narratives of dalit protest literature and political activism, and ways that are written out of such narratives for not overtly articulating a desire to eradicate caste-generated social and cultural disabilities.

In my reading of Marathi dalit literature in this chapter, it is precisely such dalit voices that I wish to foreground, voices that address the issue of oppression in non-pedagogical and non-ideological terms and that are not at the first and every instance conscious of their contribution to transforming the social order. Needless to say, in doing so I do not wish to

suggest that the protest and revolutionizing dimensions of dalit literature are unimportant. Quest for social justice cannot but constitute the cornerstone of every battle against human oppression and, as has been documented the world over, literary creativity has played no small part in such battle. But there are two reasons why I do not intend to analyze the dalit literary archive solely in terms of its militant redressal of social wrongs. The first is the simple issue of redundancy of such analysis. There are any number of important scholarly accounts that have already studied the many faces and phases of protest in dalit writing. Giving yet another empirical account of the same would be merely adding another block to this critical edifice. The second, and much more significant, has to do with the central theoretical concerns of this thesis itself, concerns that fundamentally address the limitations of a revolutionary framework in reading about the past and present of caste, a framework that desires to fashion a true present by *willing* the past dead. As we have seen, the thesis has had as its through line the premise that caste needs to be seen as *more than* a marker/cause of India's sluggish pace toward modernity's finishing post, as more than just an institution that unleashes dehumanizing practices onto hapless masses. As we saw in the chapter preceding this one, it continues to *generate* ways of *living* in the present and in that sense is entwined with any number of other practices that have shaped and continue to shape South Asian lifeworlds. A militant stand that calls for the annihilation of caste is evacuated of precisely this experiential dimension, this *presence* of caste in late modernity.

In my reading of dalit literature I specifically focus on those poems, folksongs, short-stories and life-stories that tell us more about the ways in which the people of India live with caste and the complex ways in which they negotiate with its oppressive facets. Such negotiations are, I suggest, much more attuned to the intricacies of everyday living, its joys and sorrows, its dilemmas and delusions, its contingencies and compulsions, than the

abstract, ideological stance of militants and revolutionaries. To that extent, notwithstanding the origins of dalit literature in dalit political mobilization, this body of literary writing transcends the rhetoric of transformative politics understood in the secular, institutional sense, and draws from the vicissitudes of daily living other ways of being “political”, ways that trace the varied and complex trajectories of human negotiation with oppression and suffering outside the institutional grids of modern governmentality. I substantiate this argument by first analysing stories and poems that depict the manifold Mahar experience of living in the slums and ghettos of their dream city, Mumbai, and then going on to read those literary texts that represent the impact of the Ambedkar-led conversion to Buddhism on the lives of the Mahars in both rural and urban Maharashtra.

***Amchi Mumbai:*ⁱⁱⁱ Some Dalit Literary Representations**

The Ambedkar-led Mahar conversion to Buddhism in 1956 was the catalyst for a spurt of dalit literary creativity in the nineteen-sixties. The creative energy poured forth most vigorously from dalit writers and poets who had made Bombay/Mumbai their home. As Vidyut Bhagwat writes: “The dalit belongs to Bombay and Bombay belongs to the dalit. He is the anti-hero who strides on the metropolitan stage turned upside down” (1996, 121). The avalanche of dalit poetry, short-story collections and autobiographical narratives that descended on the upper-caste Marathi literary establishment caused no small consternation within its ranks, for here was writing that challenged almost every cherished socio-cultural and literary convention. In the sixties and seventies dalit writers such as Shankarrao Kharat, Baburao Bagul, Annabhau Sathe and Bandhu Madhav wrote about dalit experiences with unmatched fury and trenchancy. Bagul described the existing forms of Marathi creative writing as “*Sadashiv Pethi*” literature^{iv} (the reference is to a bourgeois, Brahmin dominated locality in Pune). The implication was that such literature was far

removed from the world of slum dwellers, garbage collectors, lepers, pimps and prostitutes of Mumbai that dalit writing represented. Bagul's own collection of short stories published in 1969, *Maran Swasta Hot Ahe* (Death is Getting Cheaper), depicts precisely the trials and tribulations of such a non-elite, non-bourgeois world. The eponymous short story in this collection begins with a conversation between the writer and his poet friend about effective ways to represent the "truth" of Mumbai. In their peripatetic experience of the metropolis, in the course of which they deploy alternately the registers of objective, distanced analysis and of literary creativity to discuss Mumbai, they are suddenly confronted by a scene near a railway station that makes nonsense of both the analytic, intellectual mode of apprehension and literary representation. The poet friend ends up acknowledging the impotence of literary niceties and even words in the face of such brutalizing truths:

There was a big crowd at the water tap. People were fighting for water. A railway policeman was there with two goondas, looking for a girl for himself while he was controlling the crowd. And the grandchild of an old uncle with an old iron pot in his hand was wandering in and out of the crowd like a cat.

My friend said, "I'll throw away what I wrote. I'll just keep one line: "This is Bombay. Here men eat men. And Death is Getting Cheaper."^v

The dalit poetry that emerged around the same time completely revolutionized that linguistic register of Marathi literature with its over-the-top deployment of street and slum derived obscenities and its confronting description of the stomach-churning realities of lower caste existence on the fringes of villages and cities of Maharashtra. As an example, here is an excerpt from Prakash Jadhav's poem, "Under Dadar Bridge":

I piss in the bastard gutter which
Has links with high-class sewage water
'Who was he? Who's my father?'
Scraping and scratching at the VD sores
That traced
The world's map on her flower-like breasts,

Shrivelled during the malaria epidemic,
She would answer: 'He was some swine or other!'^{vi}

The force of such writing was sought to be channelled for political ends by a handful of writers and poets in the early seventies. In 1970, at a Dalit Literature conference in Mahad, Baburao Bagul declared, "The established literature of India is Hindu literature. But it is Dalit literature which has the revolutionary power to accept new science and technology and bring about a total transformation. 'Dalit' is the name for total revolution; it is revolution incarnate."^{vii} Arjun Dangle wrote: "Dalit literature is one which acquaints people with the caste system and untouchability in India, its appalling nature and its system of exploitation. Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows, and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society. It matures with a *sociological point of view* and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary."^{viii} It wasn't surprising then that the Dalit Panthers was formed as a political party on 9 July 1972 on the initiative of a handful of dalit poets, writers and intellectuals.

It is my contention, however, that dalit literature, as it has panned out in the decades preceding and following the formation of the Dalit Panthers, has shown itself to be "political" in ways that far exceed both the left-liberal interpretations of the term and attempts to read it as synonymous with a revolutionary impulse. Such interpretations have been the staple of most attempts to articulate a vision of dalit politics and the role of dalit literature within it. Poetry, said one of the founder-poets of the Panthers, Namdeo Dhasal, had to be class weapon.^{ix} And from there it had to take on the Hindu Brahminical establishment. The way to do it was to put it in the service of organizational politics – complete with its secular, institutional paraphernalia of political parties, elections, vote

banks and representation in legislative assemblies and Parliament. The political in such readings is seen as the legacy of European modernity. Hence the emphasis in dalit political and intellectual writing on scientific outlook, rationality and so on. Such a reading of the political as essentially institutional/organizational and pedagogic has been contested by modes of postcolonial criticism in recent years as we have seen in the previous chapter in our discussion of Guha and others. In the readings I undertake, in which we see facets of the dalits' intimate engagement with Mumbai, the megapolis that brutalizes as it regenerates, the idea of the political I invoke gives us a glimpse not of party mobilizations, manifestos, rallies and bitterly contested elections, but of the life-worlds of slum-dwelling dalits.

The dalits of Maharashtra have had a fraught, yet enduring, relationship with Mumbai much before twentieth century nationalist attempts by Ambedkar and Gandhi to articulate lower caste and dalit interests made cities like Mumbai, Pune and Nagpur the loci of lower-caste political activism. Vidyut Bhagwat, in her insightful reading of dalit literature, notes that the first poetical expression of the lower castes' fascination/revulsion for Mumbai can be found in an eighteenth century ballad by Shahir Parsharam (1996, 115):

Look, on the island came up a settlement
 Surrounded by the water of the sea.
 Like another Lanka of Ravan,
 No one loves anyone here.
 In this demonic state mountains of sins are a reality.
 The sinners of the four *yugas* descend and live here...
 The prince and the pauper end up in the graveyard.
 The high and low are beaten into the same shape.
 Bombay is a good bet if you are drifter ready to bear the burden...
 The skilled turn mud into gold.^x

This image of Mumbai as a land of vast potential as also of unimaginable degeneracy and destitution reappears, as we shall see, in dalit writing of the mid and late twentieth century.

The nineteenth century, too, witnessed lower caste and dalit creative representations of the metropolis. An example, again cited by Bhagwat, is Patthe Bapurao's *Mumbaichi Lavani* (The *Lavani* of Bombay). The *lavani* is a well-known form of folk performance in rural Maharashtra. It involves a dance performed to words set to foot-tapping music and written in the form of saucy answers to provocative queries about the economy of erotics. Bombay's nineteenth century growth as India's industrial and commercial capital had already begun attracting large numbers of poor, lower and untouchable caste rural workers who left their villages behind to seek new opportunities in the city. The lure of Bombay to these people, living as they did in the deeply hierarchical feudal set up of their villages and from which they could never hope to escape, can only be imagined. It is this attraction that Bapurao captures and celebrates in his *lavani*.

In the twentieth century it was Daya Pawar's life-story *Balute*, published under the aegis of Granthali in Mumbai in 1978 and then reprinted in 1982, that for the first time traced in meticulous psychological detail the journey of the Mahar community from the cruel feudal environs of rural Maharashtra to the alluring and treacherous underbelly of Mumbai. We know from his delineation of the Mahar way of life in the villages (as well, of course, from any number of ethnographical tracts on the community) that the Mahars were traditional village servants who performed certain specified duties for the upper caste villagers in return for their share of the harvest from the farming families. It is this share of the harvest that is called "*balute*" in Marathi. Pawar traces the origins of his stay in Mumbai to the humiliation suffered by his widowed grandmother at the hands of the villagers who mocked her attempts to perform traditional Mahar duties in exchange for some harvest:

It was the Holi season. There was smallpox in the village. The cart of the goddess Mariai was going in procession to the next village. The Mahars used to pull it. If it was stopped

at that time, the smallpox would increase. So the Patil told me to cry this proclamation in the village: "Don't stop or delay the cart". I took the stick with bells in my hands and was going round shouting the proclamation. And there was young Kondiba, sitting on the threshold of Vithoba's temple. I don't know what whim he had. May be he wanted to make a joke of me. He stood in my way and said: "Catch hold of this Mahar woman. Tie her up in the square. Has she gone mad? She's quite happily saying 'Don't fry or fuck'". A crowd had gathered. Some were laughing."^{xi}

His grandmother decided to leave for Mumbai in search of work and that is how his own father ended up as a worker in the Bombay docks. Pawar spares no effort and certainly no one's squeamishness in his graphic details of the everyday living conditions of his immediate and extended family in one of Mumbai's utterly downmarket, disreputable localities. Sandwiched between Chor Bazaar, the notorious market for peddling stolen goods, and Kamathipura, the locus of sleaze and prostitution, his home, shared by at least ten other members, is a ten feet by twelve feet room with just an indoor tap. The latrine is shared with other inhabitants of the tenement complex:

The Mahars' living conditions were wretched. In each little cubby-hole, there were three or four sub-tenants. In between them were partitions made of packing-case wood. In these wooden boxes was their entire world. The men worked as porters. Some went to work in mills and factories."^{xii}

The women were not confined to homes either. They spent the day collecting rags, paper, broken glass, battered iron products through the city. These would be brought back, sorted out and either sent for recycling or be sold in cheap markets. Some of the women would attend to the domestic needs of the prostitutes in nearby brothels, such as washing their saris or cooking for them. In the process they would often find themselves harassed by brothel customers and would try and protect their chastity with fierce determination. The urban world of the Mahar that Pawar evokes in the pages of *Balute* is steeped in life that is

unmitigatedly elemental. Here human emotions of rage, love, hate, pity and even despair stride across the wood-packaged lives of the Mahars in all their fierce starkness. The sheer animal energy that these people display in their daily tussles to merely survive is as far removed from the civilized niceties of cosmopolitan Bombay as cacti are from fragile, specially tended orchids. Yet these slum dwellers have become a ubiquitous feature of metropolitan life, labouring to carry the burden of the city's filth. In the absence of a First World-like mechanization of domestic labour, it is the inhabitants of these slums who also flit in and out of bourgeois upper caste homes to preserve both the sanitary conditions and sanity of the latter. The bourgeois housewives of Mumbai do not have to experience first hand the daily tyranny of dust and dirt. It is the lower caste slum dwelling maids who fight the battle of the filth for them.

In this context I invoke Ashis Nandy who reminds us that slums are among the first visible signs of modernization in Third World societies and that their ubiquitous presence amidst the cityscape is matched by the embarrassment their presence generates among the privileged inhabitants of the metropolis (1998). The slums, Nandy says citing an Indian architect, can be designated as the "unintended city" (2), the city that is the invisible underside of the master plan for the intended metropolis and without which the desired and visible city cannot exist in the Third World:

The official city cannot survive without its unintended self, but it cannot own up to that self either. For that other city consists of a huge mass of technically and officially discarded "obsolete" citizens who form the underground of a modern city. They provide the energy – literally the cheap labour – that propels both the engine of civic life in a Third World society and the ambitions of its modernizing elite (2).

For the custodians of Mumbai's civil society the slums are an ominous, unmanageable presence and their fear of the dystopia that such urban ways of dwelling embody is often mocked at by dalit poets. Thus, Keshav Meshram in his poem "In Our Colony" writes:

In our colony
The postman gets bamboozled
Teachings get confused
Civilization stumbles
The sun – even he is darkened....

In our colony –
Reforms get confused
Paths are bruised, schemes stumble...
Once again begin the rounds of the police and the postman...
In our colony the postman is
Bamboozled – even now.^{xiii}

Another leading Marxist dalit poet, Narayan Surve, writes more sombrely about the hurt the dalit worker/labourer experiences when the keepers of civic order conspire with the upper echelons of metropolitan Mumbai to clear the urban space of the cursed presence of dalit hutments. Describing the life of the urban dalit labourer as a journey across two long roads, one leading to the factory and the other to the crematorium, Surve writes:

It is people like me
Builders of your grand edifice
Who add to your glory
Day after day, O city

We live in hell-holes
And clean your streets;
Yet like stray hawkers
Cops drive us out.

We move on again,
Settle in another vacant lot;
And live out the legacy
Of this putrid culture.^{xiv}

And yet the devastating lure of Mumbai is something that dalit youths can scarcely resist.

Writer after writer notes the attraction that this city of infinite possibilities and illusions has

for the impoverished, battered, humiliated, rural dalit. Daya Pawar compares the dazzle of Mumbai to that of a glowing ruby that is always within his range of vision, but something that he can never hope to possess. His desire for the metropolis stirs his blood, yet it is a desire that is fated to frustration:

I can't help wondering what this city has really given me. I feel like Jarasandha who was torn into half by Krishna and then had the two sides of his body flung in opposite directions. This city does the same to me. My refuge or home at the end of a hard day's labour is a hell-hole, scarcely a place that can calm my tortured soul. And yet this city gives me glimpses of another life from afar that is so rich and indulgent. She then appears as a temptress or as a ruby ring that dazzles. I know that side of her to be an illusion, at least for me, something that will forever elude me.^{xv}

Anna Bhau Sathe in his celebrated song *Mazhi Maina* (My Maina), a song that is now part of the repertoire of popular dalit consciousness (and one whose strains still echo in my ears for I have heard it often on raucous loud speakers when walking or driving past hutment colonies in north-eastern parts of Mumbai), sings of his promise to his village beloved, Maina, that he will strike it rich in Mumbai and fulfil all her dreams. The song ends with the realization that in spite of his impoverished state he has in some senses kept his promise, for he is now "rich" in other ways: he has found the moral strength to confront the corrupt, exploitative, brutal society of upper caste industrial-commercial Mumbai. If Sathe's *Mazhi Maina* abjures materialistic aspirations and is imbued with the idealism of romance and revolution, his powerful short story, "Gold from the Grave" – a short story I analyze later in this chapter – takes literally the expression "striking it rich" in Mumbai and gives it a gruesome, bone-rattling twist by making his protagonist feed his family by digging for gold ornaments among the incinerated corpses of upper caste Hindus in crematoria around Mumbai. The lure of gold or money in this metropolis, Sathe suggests, is ghoulis.

Perhaps, the best known poetic celebration of Mumbai's profane, lascivious temptations is Namdeo Dhasal's "*Mumbai, Mazhya Priya Rande*" (Mumbai, My Beloved Whore) published in his collection, *Khel* (Game) in 1983. A long poem of eleven stanzas, it is a passionate paean to an intensely erotic yet faithless city where redemption can only be found in surrender and dissolution to its fatal charms. This poem is almost Nietzschean in its exhortation to the dazed, hapless dalit youth to plumb the intensities of profane ways of being and living. Mumbai invites plunder and fornication, and a little pain experienced at times, the poem suggests, is a hardly a steep enough price for a glimpse of the incredible sensuality of this magnificent whore. The pleasure of playing with her is Dionysian:

You warm up our beds
 Play the flute of Eternity
 Play around with our dreams
 Breathe fire into our sperms
 O footloose hussy
 O churlish slut
 O Khandoba's concubine
 O wanton coquette
 O whore with the heart of gold
 I won't go away from you like a ragged beggar
 I'll strip you to your bone
 Come, throw open the gates of heaven to the poor devils
 Mumbai, my beloved whore
 I'll take you for a ride
 I'll strike you dumb
 And go.^{xvi}

Dhasal's poem is replete with images of an intoxicating urban way of living that, he suggests, the dalit youth should embrace with joy and recklessness. His later collection of poems on life in the midst of the city brothels, *Golpitha*, published in Pune in 1975, are darker and heavier in tone. It is the sordidness and dehumanizing nature of human existence in the twilight zone of pimps, prostitutes, brothel owners and drug peddlers that he foregrounds in these poems. Vijay Tendulkar, the renowned Marathi playwright who

prefaced *Golpitha*, describes Dhasal's world in this collection as a "no man's land" where "days belong to the night, where bellies are empty or only half-full, where the stench and pain of death are palpable, where tomorrow's worries eat away at the soul, where shame and empathy burn to ashes...where even leper women have a price and are fucked while abandoned children of whores cry, where whores sing passionate love-songs as they await their customers, from where there is no exit, where one can only run in circles and return where one began, that's Golpitha. The Golpitha that does not know the language of pity, forgiveness and peace."^{xvii} In the following poem entitled "*Tyanchi Sanatan Daya*" (Their Eternal Pity), Dhasal, in the space of nine punch-filled lines, writes of a world so unredeemable, so devoid of even minimal human worth that the pity and condescension of the privileged classes of Mumbai toward the inhabitants of Golpitha appear utterly wasted:

Their eternal pity is no taller than the pimp on Falkland road.
Honestly, their sheltering cover does not touch the sky,
The wealthy lock up even light in their vaults.
While our lives carried on the hips of prostitutes,
Have no sidewalks to call their own.
Our vulnerability would make even humanity nauseous,
Even mud cannot fill up our dried up, shrivelled innards.
Each new day appears to favour them as if freshly bribed,
While it has not a sigh to spare as it witnesses our daily killing.^{xviii}

It is precisely such a dark, damned corner of Mumbai that forms the setting of two other very powerful short stories by dalit writers that I am about to discuss. One of them, "Gold from the Grave", by Anna Bhau Sathe has already been mentioned earlier. The other is "Livelihood" by Bhimrao Shirwale. Both stories verge on the grotesque and even the macabre as they delineate the desperation of the dalit dwellers of Mumbai to make a living. The "nauseous" quality of their daily living at the very edges of human decency and sanity are brought out graphically in these stories. One of the common sights on the streets of Mumbai are groups of female beggars who carry deformed or sickeningly malnourished children on their laps to play on the pity of passers-by and coax them into parting with

some of their loose change. Shirwale's "Livelihood"^{xix} is the story of one such woman, Kashi, a resident of the hutments in Koliwada, a working class suburb in Mumbai. When her husband, Dharma, goes to prison for murdering a Marwari businessman, she is left alone not only to earn her livelihood but also to fend off the lecherous advances of neighbouring men. Finally, to keep other prowlers at bay, she shacks up with a deformed, brutalizing, ex-bootlegger and crook, Kesu Ghatge, and from him has a monster of a child:

The child had been born without shape or form. Every bit of Kesu's monstrosity was reincarnated in it. The head was outsize. The upper lip was missing. And the only sign of a nose were two holes. With a distended stomach and limbs like match-sticks, the creature bore no resemblance to humanity. And it had begun to scream from the moment it was born (33).

With Kesu also away in prison on an assault charge, Kashi capitalizes on her child's deformation and he becomes a regular source of income for her: "People threw coins on account of the terrifying ugliness of that baby's face. She realized he was the trump card in her life" (34). Soon she starts leasing out her child to other beggars as well and makes enough money to buy her own shack. The story ends with Kesu Ghatge walking into her hut one afternoon two years later and with brutal force carrying off what would now be *his* source of livelihood: his monstrous offspring.

Shirwale's is a dystopic portrayal of Mumbai, the metropolis that promises mirage-like returns for hard and honest labour, and extracts a steep, dehumanizing price for hosting its labouring, slum-dwelling, dalit masses. Kashi's husband, Dharma, we are told intended to labour and live a straight life with his wife in the city. But work was rarely forthcoming and the call of the stomach led him through a path that "cut clean through good and bad" (28). In this bleak zone of hunger, need and skewed morality, "he thieved as well as

laboured. Picked pockets and carried loads. Conned people, cheated people and slit people's throats" (28). And all because he wanted to "live", not waste away and die. This will to *life* is evident in all the characters in this story, Kashi, Kesu and Dharma. This will, in a relentlessly cruel city like Mumbai, may take forms that are obnoxious and even gruesome to its upper class dwellers, but it is what enables the honing of life forms that have become inalienable components of the cityscape. The grotesque, the monstrous and the macabre, symbolized in the story by Kashi and Kesu's child, are as much a feature of Mumbai as are its cosmopolitan plenitude and razzmatazz, and its civic niceties.

The protagonist of Anna Bhau Sathe's story, "Gold from the Grave"^{xx} tells as much to his wife when she expresses her fear at his ghastly means of livelihood, extracting gold from the charred remains of corpses:

'Who's told you that ghosts only haunt graveyards?' retorted Bheema. 'This city of Bombay itself is a colony of ghosts. The real specters live in houses and the dead one's rot in the graves. Monsters breed in the city, not in the jungles', Bheema concluded (66).

Sathe's razor-sharp indictment of Mumbai's lethal material attractions cuts to the bone as we witness Bheema degeneration from a robust daytime quarry worker to a fierce, nocturnal and satanic grave defiler who competes for corpses with jackals. It is a gruesome transformation forced on him by the vagaries of the casual nature of his daytime employment which one day without notice dispenses with his labour. A committed family man who feels his failure deeply for not being able to provide for his beloved wife and daughter, Bheema one day stumbles upon some gold on the body of a charred corpse in a crematorium. In his desperation, he transcends the common human wariness and aversion towards corpses and makes filching of gold ornaments from the upper caste cremated dead

his nocturnal preoccupation. He soon starts defiling graves as well and the gruesome climax of the story has him fearlessly battling with jackals. In describing this battle, the author provides a classic dalit spin on Hindu mythology by comparing his fearlessness and strength to that of the legendary Bheema, the second Pandava son of Kunti in the *Mahabharata*:

Bheema, who bore the name of the second son of Kunti, was fighting the jackals for the possession of a carcass, his daily bread. A grim battle was fought in the vicinity of the village, a battle that would never be recorded in the annals of the country's mythology (67).

There is a twist to this mythological invocation. This particular Bheema's battle for survival – its sacrilegious and gruesome nature notwithstanding – Sathe suggests, is perhaps even more heroic than that of the privileged Pandava prince, for the dalit Bheema fights the elements entirely on his own without mighty brothers and other courtly advisors. And as if to reinforce the heroic nature of his daily battle to make a livelihood, the author gives his protagonist a tragic stature at the end. The dalit who would go to any lengths to labour and enable his family to survive in Mumbai has his fingers amputated in the end. They are caught in the death bite of a skulled corpse, and fear of infection compels the surgeon to cut them off. Soon after, Bheema hears that work in the quarry will resume and he is left heartbroken at this lost opportunity to make an honest living by his labouring hands: “That giant of a man called Bheema wept like a child. Those very fingers with which he smashed stone to smithereens were lost for the sake of gold from the graveyard” (215).

If Bhimrao Shirvale's and Anna Bhau Sathe's stories give us a glimpse of life lived at the darkest, deprived and deprived end of Mumbai's lower caste, labouring spectrum, short

stories such as Arjun Dangle's "Promotion"^{xxi} take us to the "civilized" world of the white collared dalit in the offices of metropolitan Mumbai. This is the dalit who, as the beneficiary of the nation-state's policies for affirmative action, is the face of modernizing India. His presence is what marks the "arrival" of India as a modern, secular, democratic nation, a nation of citizens unmarked by "pre-modern" signifiers of identity such as caste and religion. And yet it is an arrival destined to ambivalence and incompleteness, as Dangle so evocatively portrays in his story. Waghmare, an Assistant Purchase Officer with the Indian railways, has benefited from the reservation of 33% positions for Scheduled Castes and Tribes in government-based jobs. In being thus promoted he has superseded a Brahmin colleague, Godbole, who does not hide his displeasure and contempt:

'Look here Godbole, the lady's on leave for two more days and this proposal has to be sent in today. Please get it ready. If you don't I shall have to...'

'You can report me if you like. I have told you a thousand times that this is not my job.'

'Have some manners and learn to respect your superiors'.

'I know you are my superior, but I am senior to you. Please note that'. (168)

Waghmare refrains from reporting Godbole's insubordination. Unlike his friend Awale, Waghmare is not a militant dalit who wears his post-Ambedkarite identity with pride and defiance. On the contrary he takes great pains to erase from his office and home all signs of his scheduled caste identity. He is desperate to gain acceptance in Mumbai's upper caste, bourgeois society. His embourgeoisement/sanskritization^{xxii} appears complete when he stops attending meetings of the railway Backward Class Association, when he refuses to travel second class on local trains with his other dalit friends, when he cringes at his clerical friend Gaekwad's loud morning greeting, "*Jai Bheem*" (this greeting, invoking Ambedkar, is shared among dalits in Maharashtra), when he tells himself that he should

change his surname to the Brahmin-sounding “Akolkar” and when he admonishes his wife for inviting her slummy relatives to his railway officer’s quarters:

“Come, don’t get carried away. We don’t live in the B.B.D chawls. Next, you’ll have the entire slum visiting you – what will our neighbours say?”

....

“Learn to maintain your status. After all, you’re an officer’s wife.” (172)

The story culminates, however, not with Waghmare’s successful shedding of his dalit identity, but with a crashingly painful reminder to him that a mere three or four decades of nationalist attempts to ameliorate the plight of the lowest castes are ineffectual in wiping out recalcitrant traces of millennia-old sedimentation of upper caste prejudice against untouchables. Just after he admonishes his wife for entertaining her disreputable, shabby relatives, he notices that his son has a bruised knee. His son fills him with the details:

“D’you know that Pramod, who has a super Ganpati? His Grandma pushed me.”

“Why? Did you beat him?”

“No. We were playing and I drank water from his water pot.” (172)

The irony of his son’s maltreatment at the hands of his neighbour being reflected in his own attitude to his wife’s relatives, does not escape him. Waghmare is left defenceless as he contemplates the fragility and futility of his attempts to assume the status of an honorary upper caste Hindu. For him there is no escape from being a dalit even in late twentieth century India. And yet, unlike his friend Awale it is not in him to be militant and demand that the upper caste Indians treat dalits with respect. For all his anguish towards the end – “a mere mortal named Pandurang Satwa Waghmare crashes helplessly into the abyss below” (172) – we are left in no doubt he would continue his efforts to blend into the urban upper caste mainstream by playing down his dalitness. He would continue to aspire to be

truly an unmarked citizen of independent India, aware though he is that it is an aspiration doomed to unrealisation.

What I have attempted to do in this section is to delineate the multifarious ways in which the dalits negotiate living with caste in the context of urban India, of which one exemplary space is the city of Mumbai. My depiction has been based on my argument that such everyday negotiations with the realities of caste – as we witnessed in the stories and poems just analyzed – are not at every instance circumscribed by the rhetoric of transformative politics that is the hallmark of public debates on caste and the status of dalits in contemporary India. Such rhetoric, as I argue through the chapters that constitute this section of my thesis, in its desire to modernize Indian society, is evacuated of the experiential presence of caste in the lives of millions of Indians. The “emptiness of abstraction”, as the epigraph to this chapter suggests, cannot but haunt such rhetoric. In the final part of this chapter, I depict another aspect of this experiential dimension of caste by drawing on texts that give us a glimpse of the ways in which the dalits in Maharashtra live with the conversion of the Mahar community to Buddhism.

Old Gods, New Gods: *Bhakti*, Buddhism, Ambedkarism

When Eleanor Zelliot in her 1992 study on the Ambedkar movement^{xxiii} declared that “Dalit *Sahitya* seems to be only marginally concerned with the Buddhist conversion” (259), she was referring to that body of literature that was created in conjunction with the political mobilization of dalits in Maharashtra in the early seventies. The founders of the Dalit Panthers – a legitimate political party – were also dalit poets and short story writers. They were less concerned with the religious dimension of the Ambedkarite movement (with the possible exception of Raja Dhale who was soon marginalized within the

group^{xxiv}) than with issues of economic and social exploitation. If Buddhism did matter to them, it was not so much as *faith* as the extent to which it, in its critique of the otherworldly rituals of high Brahmanism, inaugurated a more *rational* mindset for the dalits. This was more in keeping with the modernizing impulse of dalit politics. Buddhism, as the dalit historian K.N. Kadam writes, was all about “rationalism” and “humanism” (1997). It is, thus, not surprising that in the flagship anthology that first brought Marathi Dalit literature in English translation to national and world attention, The Poisoned Bread, there are only two poems that refer to the Buddha. They are Bhagwan Sawai’s “Tathagata” and Hira Bansode’s “Yashodhara.”^{xxv} Bansode’s is a feminist contemplation on the feelings of Buddha’s wife, Yashodhara, at being left behind by her husband *en route* to his own self-realization. She was the casualty of the Buddha’s spiritual quest:

He went, he conquered, he shone.
While you listened to the songs of his triumph
Your womanliness must have wept (32).

The poem ends with the lament that the cult of the Buddha makes no space for her sacrifice. Sawai’s poem is deeply spiritual. He desires nothing more than to merge with the Buddha and carry his spirit with him everywhere:

Tathagata
Ask no questions, questions are alien to me,
I do not know myself
Out there, there was nothing but darkness and rocky muteness
So transmigrate into me from that picture
In flesh and blood, into my effusive being (29).

In his high spiritual quest, however, he distances himself from those lay neo-Buddhists who appropriate the Buddha to Hindu modes of worship, and seeks forgiveness on their behalf for violating the modern, humanist spirit of Buddhism and transforming Buddha into a godhead:

Tathagata
I do not want you in your yogic postures as in the pictures

Before whom I could place my offerings of flowers and prayers
 Pardon the slaves of fetishism
 Who created idols in your name and festivals (30).

In doing so he partakes of the modernizing stance of other dalit activists/poets who call for a total rejection of Hindu ways of living and worship. But as we saw in the previous chapter, in the everyday life of the dalits, conversion to Buddhism did not connote a total break with earlier practices and rituals. We saw that even Ambedkar, who consciously spoke of Buddhism as inaugurating the Mahars' entry into modernity, could not wholly distance himself from practices or gestures that invoked an enchanted – and hence pre-modern – world. In what follows I look at a few examples of dalit folk literature in which both the Buddha and Ambedkar are deified in ways akin to the medieval practice of the *bhakti* saints. In distinguishing this archive from that represented in anthologies such as The Poisoned Bread, I wish to draw upon Ashis Nandy's distinction between religion-as-faith and religion-as-ideology respectively. This distinction was invoked in my introductory chapter when I wrote about the importance of Nandy's critique of secular categories of thought in reading South Asian lifeworlds. Such categories in their heroization of the present cannot begin to accommodate strains and strands from other temporalities that co-exist with the "present" of the secular intellectual (except, of course, as anomalies). And it is the hegemony of such categories that marks much of dalit politics today. But as the folk literature of dalits from rural Maharashtra indicates, Buddhism (and its corollary Ambedkarism), while giving the dalits a renewed sense of pride in their identity, operates as more than just an ideology for social change. In being absorbed into the heterogeneity of other practices through which the Mahars have sought to connect with the divine, Buddhism in rural Maharashtra has been pluralized as faith (not "domesticated" as an ideological reading would have it) in ways not anticipated by its ideologues.

The popular songs that celebrate and deify both the Buddha and Ambedkar are not found so much in academically produced anthologies, as in pamphlets and other handouts that are circulated during so called Buddhist festivals – the *Buddha Jayanti*, the anniversary of Ambedkar’s conversion and *Ambedkar Jayanti*. In such songs both the Buddha and Ambedkar are deified as saviours of the dalits. Here is one by Rajananda Gadapyle called “*Jagati Pranjyota*” (The Awakened Torch of Life). It was written a short while after the 1956 conversion:

The light of enthusiasm is spread everywhere
 And the teaching of Buddha gives delight.
 The evil days of slavery are gone
 And the sorrowful songs are gone.
 Bhim gave us the great hymn *Buddham Saranam Gachchami*
 And by attaining the perfection of this hymn
 We become riders of own chariot.^{xxvi}

Another song by Rau Bhima links the current resurrection of the Buddha with the glory of Buddhism in ancient India:

Bring to this country once again
 The blessed name
 Which made land of thy birth sacred
 To all the distant lands!
 Let the great awakening under the Bodhi tree
 Be fulfilled.
 Let the open doors that were barred
 And the resounding conch shell
 Proclaim thy arrival at Bharat’s gate.
 Let, through innumerable voices,
 The gospel of an immeasurable love
 Announce thy call.^{xxvii}

Apart from songs there have been many attempts by dalit writers to retell folk tales and legends from the life and times of the Buddha. Murlidhar Bhosekar has written a folk narrative on the life of Buddha’s wife, Yashodhara, called *Siddharthachi Yashodhara* (Siddhartha’s Yashodhara).^{xxviii} He later went on to write another story on the Buddha’s life as the prince of Kapilavastu.

An anthropologist and folklorist from Minnesota, Indira Jhungare, has collected hundreds of songs composed by neo-Buddhists that celebrate the achievements of Ambedkar. This was done during her fieldwork in the village of Neri (near Nagpur) in the late seventies and early eighties. Her findings published in an issue of the Asian Folklore Studies^{xxix} richly reinforce the observation made in this and in the previous chapter that *bhakti* as a mode of worship of a personalized God is alive and well among the dalits and the lower castes, notwithstanding the dalit movement's ideological rejection of it as conformist and quietist. Both Ambedkar and the founders of the dalit literary movement in the seventies rejected the legacy of devotional poetry written by the Mahar *bhakti* saints of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Chokhamela and Karmamela.^{xxx} For while both these *bhakti* poets were intensely conscious of their status as untouchables and lamented about it ever so often in their pleas to God, there was an implicit acceptance in both of caste as a "social absolute that [could] not be transcended" (Mishra, 40). Mishra continues: "The positions of Chokhamela and his son Karmamela demonstrate that a radical resocialization or even a proto-Sanskritization of the self was not an alternative" (40). The path to salvation for them lay not in any possibility of social change but in loving and total submission to their deity. Thus Chokhamela writes:

Johar maybap johar
 I am your Mahar's Mahar
 I am hungry
 For your leftovers
 I am hopeful
 I am the servant of your slaves
 For your leavings
 I've brought my basket.^{xxxi}

The interesting thing about the Mahar songs retrieved by Jhungare is that while they reflect none of the quietude and submission to the realities of caste hierarchy as we see in

Chokhamela and Karmamela, in their performance they nevertheless deploy many of the rhetorical and thematic conventions of such devotional poetry. These include making use of phrases and expressions that appeal to a known community of believers, repeating evocative lines, singing in groups called *bhajan mandalis*^{xxxii} where one singer leads with a line at a time and the rest of the group follows, expressing deep love and devotion to the divine object of desire (either the Buddha or Ambedkar) and admitting the devotee's insignificance or abjection in the godly presence of Ambedkar.

Jhungare gives us a number of devotional songs that deify Ambedkar through either of the two processes well known in the practice of Hinduism: one is the process of exaltation or ascension where Ambedkar merges with the Supreme and becomes a God himself, and the other is the process where he descends on earth as an *avatara* – that is, a God in human form – to combat social evils. As an example of the latter I cite two stanzas from the song titled, “Ambedkar: The Avatar of Bhimaraya”:

To this fortunate land of ours, appeared the avatar of Bhimaraya
 Through his grace, millions of the poor and downtrodden are bettered
 To this fortunate land of ours, appeared the avatar of Bhimaraya.

When he was our leader, the whole world trembled.
 When he was our leader, the whole world trembled.

The sinful Brahmin stopped preaching, the poor and downtrodden
 breathed freely.

To this fortunate land of ours, appeared the avatar of Bhimaraya.

Whose grace touched the lives of millions of poor dalits.
 On this land appeared the avatar of Bhimaraya.^{xxxiii}

The Marathi version (in Neri dialect) is as follows:

Bhagyashali ya matecha poti, bhimrayacha avatara jhala
Jacha krupene kotyana-koti, dina dalitacha avatara jhala
Bhagyashali ya matecha poti, bhimarayacha avatara jhala

Jevha hota o ya samajacha neta, tevha thar thar kapat hoti hi sari janta
Jevha hota o ya samajacha neta, tevha thar thar kapat hoti hi sari janta

*Papi brahmanacha bol banda jhala, dina dalitacha avatara jhala
Bhagyshali ya matecha poti, bhimarayacha avatara jhala
Jacha krupene kotyana koti, bhimarayacha avatara jhala (113).*

Other songs use the motif of reincarnation to suggest while both the Buddha and Ambedkar were *avatars*, Buddha was reincarnated as Ambedkar in the twentieth century. A Hindi *bhajan* about Ambedkar and the Buddha, again retrieved by Jhungare, goes thus:

*Buddha dharamka jisne ped lagaya
Buddhake bad phirse dharm phailaya
Buddhake charanome, gariboke julphome
Samaya ragragme, buddhishtoke kankanme
Phir kaunsi jaga hai baki o mere sathi
Woh kahan nahin hain, kahan nahin hain?^{xxxiv}*

The English translation is roughly as follows:

He has planted the tree of Buddhism,
After the Buddha has spread the message of Buddhism
He is found at the feet of the Buddha, is entwined with the poor
With every cell of every Buddhist
Is there any place where he does not exist?
There is no such place, there is no such place.^{xxxv}

Ambedkar's biographer, Dhananjay Keer, concluded his account of the dalit leader's life with words that are borne out by the songs documented by Jhungare:

The unique life of Ambedkar has become a new source of learning and a new source of inspiration for devotees. From it has emerged a new deity and the lamp that will be burning in its temple in this land of temples (1962, 521).

Apart from these devotional songs there are other types of folk poetry such as the *palna* and the *ovi* that weave in the heroism of both the Buddha and Ambedkar as the redeemer of the dalits. *Palnas* are lullabies and *ovis* are "worksongs sung by women while grinding grains, lentils and spices or while doing other domestic tasks...such as plastering mud walls, making spaghetti by hand or doing farm chores such as weeding" (Jhungare, 97).

Here are two stanzas from a *palna* that celebrates Ambedkar's birth and extols his virtues:

Monday has come
 Bhimabai's baby is ready to be born.
 Blessed Ramji made a vow for a son
 The baby Bhim was born.
 Sleep, baby, sleep. Sleep, baby, sleep.

The baby grew like the moon
 Ramji's house was bathed in light.
 Even though he played in a dalit hut

He became determined to fight injustice.
 Sleep, baby, sleep. Sleep, baby, sleep.^{xxxvi}

I have delved into the archive of this folk literature of the Mahars/neo-Buddhists from Maharashtra to simply show the heterogeneity and density of dalit ways of living and coping with the realities of caste-based oppression. Such ways of living, as I have argued through this chapter, are not always based on a comprehensive and revolutionary rejection of the past, a rejection that marks dalitness as ideology. In contrast to such an ideologically underpinned dalitness, this folk archive, by drawing on age-old poetical and other rhetorical devices to articulate its new sense of connectedness to the social reality, is witness to dalit life-worlds wherein are intertwined discrete temporalities and non-commensurable ways of being in the world.

In the final story with which I end my contemplation of the multiple ways of dalit worlding in post-Ambedkarite Maharashtra – “*Nirvana*” (Enlightenment) by Venkatesh Madgulkar^{xxxvii} – we see a completely different take on the impact of Buddhism on rural Mahars. This is not a story that celebrates Ambedkar's “gift” of a new religion and identity to the Mahars. It is rather a compassionate portrayal of an ageing Mahar, Bavarya, who raves and rants at the imminent destruction of his way of life that the conversion of his community to Buddhism brings:

The simple soul sincerely felt that what happened shouldn't have. Up until now there was a mere distance between the village and the Maharwada; from now on he feared there would be a burning pit between them. His mind felt the heat of that fire. It burned his heart (349).

In rural Maharashtra, the Mahars have a separate establishment from the rest of the village called the Maharwada. Their subsistence depends on performing certain traditional duties for the upper caste villagers in return for which they receive provisions from the villagers. The day Bavarya's Maharwada decides to convert *en masse* to Buddhism, the Mahars decide not to ever perform any of their traditional village duties. This enforced severance from existing modes of daily living unsettles old Bavarya completely:

The fact was Bavarya was unhappy. He was miserable. These days he even could not sleep well. His sleep had become light like a watchdog's. He was lying down that night but his eyelids hardly touched each other. He suffered tortures thinking of things as they had been in other times and as they were now (351).

Unlike his other Mahar/neo-Buddhist counterparts who make up for their loss of village duties and sources of income by joining the ranks of industrial workers in nearby towns, Bavarya is unable to contemplate a life that deprives him of his right to perform his traditional rural duties such as carrying carcasses or lighting lanterns or conveying messages across the village. This is the only way he has ever lived. He stubbornly goes about his tasks and refuses to participate in the neo-Buddhist ways of the Maharwada. He is heartbroken when the Mahars are left out of a prominent marriage celebration in the village. On one occasion when he pleads with his people to carry gas lanterns at a procession, he is hounded out of the Maharwada. As the irrevocable loss of his life-world stares him in the face, he descends into insanity:

His screaming and shouting made Bavarya hoarse...But his shouts had no more the color of wrath. The burning of the

body and the fire in the head both cooled. He now looked like a mad mendicant. The whole *Maharwada* knew that Bavarya had gone mad (354).

In a heart-wrenching scene we see him beat his chest and cry out loud that he has become the Buddha. The conversion, far from shoring up his life, has completely sapped him of his desire to live. The violence of the neo-Buddhists at the end of the story – when they beat him to death for participating in the *Bendar* festival – is an apt metaphor for the potentially destructive nihilism that nestles in the heart of any ideological response to life's contradictions and complexities. There is no space in such response for compassion towards, and an understanding of, other ways of living and belonging to this world. It is not Buddhism as *faith* but Buddhism as *ideology* that constitutes the foundation of social change among the Mahars in the story. Little wonder then that the neo-Buddhist community to which Bavarya is forced to belong cannot comprehend Bavarya's anguish at the loss of the only way he has participated in living. They can only brand his resistance and heartbreak as delusional and as a betrayal of the cause of dalit liberation.

It is interesting that even the anthropologists/translators, Miller and Kale, who have retrieved the story in order to understand the many dimensions of the impact of Ambedkarite Buddhism^{xxxviii} on the Mahar community, can read Bavarya's resistance to Buddhist conversion only in developmental terms as regressive, as a kind of sickness that is unwilling to let go of the past. Their sociological vision compels them to underscore the fact that the Buddhist conversion among the dalits was intimately tied to the fifties vision of a modernizing nation, and that the liberation of traditional dalit labourers could only be accomplished by their participation as industrial workers in a capitalist economy. Such an interpretation of the significance of Ambedkarite conversion cannot but see in Bavarya's

intense desire to participate in the traditional activities of the village, a sign of capitulation to upper caste demands and to a broadly feudal way of life. They compare him to a “faithful dog who wags happily in appreciation of a kind word or a pat on the head” (358). That sudden change ideologically imposed by agents of modernity and modernization need not necessarily and automatically be life-enriching to many even among the so-called oppressed, is not an interpretation that carries much favour with liberalism-imbued academic and activist discourses. And there is indeed, as so much social history attests, much to be said for the contribution of liberal ways of thought towards alleviating human oppression. But to keep one’s mind open to the possibility that a desire to be modern or a desire for change need not characterize every human impulse is also to accept the ambiguities of human existence. What I have attempted in this chapter (and continue to develop in the chapter that follows) is, thus, to make a case for a reading of the many dimensions of human oppression in terms of the sheer variety, contradictions and magnitude of human responses to change and progress.

ⁱ “An Ultimatum”, trans. Charudutta Bhagwat, The Poisoned Bread, ed. Arjun Dangle. (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1992), 14.

ⁱⁱ “This Country is Broken”, trans. Vilas Sarang, ed. Dangle, 37.

ⁱⁱⁱ The phrase literally means “Our Mumbai” in Marathi.

^{iv} Cited in Lata Murugkar, 53.

^v Trans. Vidyut Bhagwat and Eleanor Zelliott, Bombay: Mosaic of Modern Culture, eds. Sujata Patel and Alice Thorner, (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1996), 121.

^{vi} Trans. Shanta Gokhale and Nissim Ezekiel, ed. Dangle, 57.

^{vii} From “Dalit Literature is But Human Literature”, trans. Milind Malshe, ed. Dangle, 289.

^{viii} “Dalit Literature: Past, Present and Future”, trans. Avinash S. Pandit and Daya Agarwal, ed. Dangle, 264-265, emphasis added.

^{ix} Cited in Murugkar, 60.

^x Trans. Vidyut and Sharmila, eds. Patel and Thorner, 115.

^{xi} Trans. Priya Adarkar, ed. Dangle, 83.

- xii Trans. Priya Adarkar, 79.
- xiii Trans. V.G. Nand, ed. Dangle, 9-10.
- xiv Trans. Mangesh Kulkarni, Jatin Wagle and Abhay Sardesai, eds. Patel and Thorner, 150
- xv Translation mine, Daya Pawar's *Balute*, (Mumbai: Granthali, 1982), 132.
- xvi Trans. Mangesh Kulkarni and Abhay Sardesai, eds. Patel and Thorner, 156.
- xvii Translation mine, Vijay Tendulkar, "Prastavana" (Preface), *Golpitha*, Namdeo Dhasal, (Pune: Nilkanth Prakashan, 1975), 8-9.
- xviii Translation mine, "Tyanchi Sanatan Daya", poem no. 1, *Golpitha*, 1
- xix Trans. by Shanta Gokhale, *Homeless in my Land: Modern Marathi Dalit Short Stories*, ed. Arjun Dangle, (Mumbai: Disha Books, 1992), 27-36.
- xx Trans. by H.V. Shintre, *Homeless in my Land*, ed. Dangle, 64-69.
- xxi Trans. Lalita Paranjape, *The Poisoned Bread*, ed. Dangle, 168-172.
- xxii The term, as is well known, was coined by M.N. Srinivas to mark the process by which the lowest castes assumed the attitudes, practices and rituals of upper caste Hindus in an attempt to do away with the socio-cultural disadvantages they suffered from.
- xxiii *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 1992).
- xxiv See Lata Murugkar for the Dhale-Dhasal split within the Dalit Panthers on the issue of Buddhism versus Marxism.
- xxv Trans. Radha Iyer and Jayant Karve-Philip Engblom respectively.
- xxvi Translator unknown. Published in Zelliott, 257
- xxvii Translator unknown. Published in Zelliott, 258
- xxviii Pune: Ravindra Prakashan, 1975.
- xxix "Dr. Ambedkar: The Hero of the Mahars, Ex-Untouchables of India", (Vol. 47, 1988), 93-121.
- xxx See Jayashree B Gokhale-Turner's "Bhakti or Vidroha: Continuity and Change in Dalit Sahitya", ed. Jayant Lele, *Tradition and Modernity in Bhakti Movements*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981), 29-42, and Vijay Mishra, *Devotional Poetics and the Indian Sublime*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 39-41.
- xxxi Trans. by Jayashree B. Gokhale-Turner from *Shrisakalasantagatha*; see her "Bhakti or Vidroha....", 31.
- xxxii *Bhajan* is another term for a devotional song. *Mandalis* are groups.
- xxxiii I have made a few modifications in the translation provided by Jhungare. See 112-113.
- xxxiv Jhungare, 117
- xxxv Translation mine. See Jhungare's on 116.
- xxxvi Trans. Jhungare, 106-7.

^{xxxvii} Trans. Robert J. Miller and Pramodh Kale. The complete story was published in a jointly written essay by the two called "The Burden on the Head is Always There" for Michael J. Mahar ed. The Untouchables in Contemporary India, (Tuscon: The University of Arizona Press, 1972).

^{xxxviii} See their claim at the start of their essay: "The radical changes inherent in religious conversion of this kind might...be expected to create a Mahar 'crisis of identity'. Efforts to explore such questions are, however, severely hampered by a paucity of material that might elucidate the Mahar's 'self-image' prior to conversion and their social and psychological reactions afterwards. A promising, though little used avenue of inquiry is literature created by members of depressed groups" (318).

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHANDRA, VELUTHA, AMMU, DEATH THE APORIA OF THE AESTHETIC

Art is an unconscious form of historiography, the memory of what has been vanquished or repressed, perhaps an anticipation of what is possible.

Theodor Adorno

I am a novelist. I don't generalize.

Margaret Atwood

The chapters in the second section of my thesis have dealt with non-sociological readings of caste and dalit ways of belonging. In my interpretation of both the mythographies of Ambedkar and dalit creative writing, life-stories and folk songs we have seen readings emerge that resist the totalizing impulse of social science analyses of caste and dalit oppression. We have seen this archive especially foregrounding and addressing those aspects of living with caste that nestle stubbornly, sometimes quietly, sometimes aggressively, sometimes tragically, in the nooks and crannies of the bedrock of modernization on which social science discourses are based. The modernizing thrust of social scientific analysis of caste can see reflected in them only a flawed, deeply retrogressive way of belonging that is bound to retard South Asia's march towards developed nationhood and modernity. Thus, we saw among others the lament of scholars over the "reactionary" effects of the Ambedkarite conversion of dalits to Buddhism. The very disciplinary compulsions of social science analysis propel such scholars to iron out

the multiple incommensurabilities of the dalit life-world, in the process evacuating it of its throbbing, pulsating density, its heterogeneous colours and textures, its many moods, sensations and sensibilities.

Jurgen Habermas – and somewhat differently Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schutz before him – has written extensively on the importance of rescuing the life-world from its troubling opacity to reason and scientific analysis. Debate on the life-world has been a feature of European thought on both philosophical and social registers. The term was first invoked by Husserl to address the limits of empirical science and its epistemological foundations. His student Alfred Schutz was the first to use the concept in social theory to signify the subjectively and intersubjectively experienced dimension of social life that the typified meaning structures of social scientific thought tend to bracket out. Habermas in his works, The Legitimation Crisis (1976) and Theory of Communicative Action (1984, 1987), gave the term a new fillip in the context of social theory by seeing it as the domain of pre-reflective communicative or linguistic practices that serves as a counterpoint to rational or scientific cognition and instrumentalist reason as embodied in modern economies and administrative states. On the philosophical register, as we shall see later, it is Heidegger's *Dasein* or his anti-subjectivist notion of ontic belonging with its focus on the subject's enmeshedness in things in the first instance, that lends the category life-world a particular density and radicalism – makes it “strong” in the words of Fred Dallmayr (1989) – not available to it in social theory.

In its most general sense the term can be used to connote the phenomenology of everyday life or the world of commonsense. It emphasizes the embodiment and situatedness of subjects. In this chapter, when I talk of untouchable life-worlds, it is this general

connotation that I resort to while keeping in mind its philosophical force as articulated in debates in European thought about the limits of (social) scientific thought. Let me now attempt to link this concept with my critique of social scientific and secular historical readings of caste in South Asia. In the South Asian context, much historical and sociological writing is witness to reason's collusion with historicism, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has recently pointed out. Historicism in collusion with Enlightenment rationality, Chakrabarty reminds us, "came to non-European peoples in the nineteenth century as somebody's way of saying 'not yet' to somebody else" (2000, *Provincializing Europe*, 8). The result is a reading of the many dimensions of South Asian society and culture – its multiform life-worlds – in pedagogical terms as somehow not "modern" enough, as falling short of what the West considers as "developed". Seen through the historicist lens, caste (as we have also seen earlier in the thesis) appears as the most important signifier of South Asia's "backwardness".

It is in this context that I invoke the category "aesthetic" as more responsive to and better able than the categories of social scientific thought to represent the heterogeneous ways in which caste – considered as unambiguously retrogressive by the standards of normative modernity – weaves itself into the densely tessellated fabric of South Asian society. The aesthetic, as I go on to argue, can help take us beyond the rational, disembodied, public self of modernity – which is the self that dictates social scientific discourse in South Asia and, of course, elsewhere – to give us a glimpse of its supplement, the phenomenology of its everyday life replete with contradictions and myriad possibilities of living. In this chapter I continue to draw on non-sociological representations of caste and for my purpose bring two texts, dealing in their own idiosyncratic ways with untouchability and oppression, into conversation with each other. They are: Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997),

a novel that with much pathos but also with sensuous exuberance narrates the tragic tale of love between an untouchable and his upper caste beloved, a love destined from the moment of its initiation to destruction and death. My second text is not a novel but an essay by Ranajit Guha, the founding editor of the Subaltern Studies collective. The essay entitled “Chandra’s Death” is an unorthodox reading of a document by a historian that in fragments tells him of the death of an untouchable woman, Chandra. Chandra’s illicit lover orders her family to get her to abort their unborn child. The medication supplied by the village quack causes her to lose not just her baby but her life as well. I call Guha’s reading unorthodox because he reads into the document not just the power of ruthless upper-caste patriarchy in rural Bengal that claims victims like Chandra, but also the human drama of Chandra’s tragic death through the anguish of her family members. In the process he recuperates the document for historical and sociological analysis without annihilating its concrete particularity, its singularity as a fragment of lived experience.

This chapter has three sections. In the first, I trace a genealogy of the category “aesthetic” in European thought. My tracing will by no means be exhaustive. As any number of books on the history of the aesthetic will testify, such labour can hardly be accommodated within the scope of a thesis chapter, let alone a single section of a chapter. I focus on those thinkers who read the aesthetic in ways that address the central concerns of my thesis, concerns that have to do with the limits of social scientific and secular historical analysis. As we shall see, I use the term not just to connote art, but also as something that marks the limits of the cognitive, problem-solving dimension of human experience. Accordingly my exposition will include selective readings mainly from the works of Kant and Heidegger. In the second section, I read Guha’s celebration of the fragment as an epistemological opening up of the non-conceptual to the conceptual without rendering it equivalent to the

latter. Such a reading enables him to resist the abstracting impulse of social science/secular historical analysis that cannot but erase the singularity of events. To that extent his reading is aesthetic. In the final section of this chapter, I undertake a reading of The God of Small Things not so much as a representation of atrocities committed in the name of caste (though it undoubtedly is also that), but as writing that resists, in its very density, its recalcitrance, its representational function as a domain of signs transparently reflecting the social reality out there.

The Aesthetic: A Genealogy

The aesthetic has occupied a unique place in the history of modern European philosophy. From the time of Kant it has served as a marker of the limits of cognition and has opened up vistas of knowledge and experience not amenable to rational thought alone. In European thought the aesthetic has not been limited to the study of art and specific art works. Rather, as Terry Eagleton puts it in his discussion on Adorno, the aesthetic is something that “does not oust systematic thought, but something that furnishes it with a model of sensuous receptivity to the specific” (1990, 361). That is, the aesthetic is concerned with the whole domain of the *subjective*, which includes among other things feelings of pleasure, pain or wonder at the beauty and glory of the world around, feelings and sensations that are an end in themselves and that do not require a foundation in anything external to themselves in order to be considered as valid. In my use of the category aesthetic, and especially in my reading of the two texts that constitute this chapter, it is precisely this force of the *subjective* that I wish to retain. To the extent that I read Arundhati’s Roy’s novel as an *artefact* or art object, I also suggest that as a literary work it offers a take on caste and untouchability, a kind of *knowledge* if you like, of living with caste that is not available to social scientific analysis. This section revolves round an axis whose twin poles are Kantian

thought on the one hand and Heideggerian phenomenology and anti-subjectivism on the other. It perhaps needs to be said at this stage that I am well aware of the difference in the ways the “subjective” is read by Kant and Heidegger respectively and that it is not my intention to gloss over these differences in order to distil a coherent and continuous reading of the aesthetic for my convenience. I do want to maintain, however, that their respective takes on the subjective have more common ground than might seem at first glance – Kant’s subjective judgement versus Heidegger’s anti-subjectivist, anti-instrumentalist notion of worlding and so on. Both, after all, in invoking the aesthetic make a case for a non-conceptual apprehension of the world.

Art, says Heidegger in his “The Origin of a Work of Art”, “is the happening of truth” (78). I begin my brief account of the genealogy of aesthetics in modern European thought by invoking the views of this most radical of thinkers on the value of art and the aesthetic in the modern world. Heidegger’s ontological valorization of poetry as language that brings *things* to light has its origins in his critique of the nihilism of scientific knowledge. Such knowledge reduces a *thing* to an *object*. By the latter he means “that which stands before, over against, opposite us” (1971, 168). It is precisely this subject-object distinction that Heidegger seeks to dismantle in his use of the term *Dasein* (literally, being there). As Terry Eagleton puts it pithily in his reading of Heidegger, *Dasein* is a “response to the question: What must already have taken place for our traffic with the world to be possible?” (291). Heidegger’s contention is that the very experience of being is the experience of being amidst things in the first instance. It is not as if we exist in a vacuum first and then experience the world as external to us. Before we begin conceptualizing our relationship to things around us, we already have a spontaneous, pre-analytical, affective, practical orientation to things around us. It is this ontological condition of enmeshedness with the

world where nothing ever exists in isolation from others, where nothing is really *external* to anything else, that Heidegger calls *Dasein*. It is the condition that marks the density, depth, suggestiveness of things, or what Heidegger calls the “thing-ness” of things. Scientific – or technological as Heidegger would call it – knowledge with its emphasis on epistemological detachment – that is, its positing of a subject-object dichotomy – empties things of precisely this “thing-ness”, of their very own singularity and orientation to the world. His famous example is that of the jug:

What and how the jug *is* as this jug-thing, is something we can never learn – let alone think properly – by looking at the outward appearance, the *idea*. That is why Plato who conceives of the presence of what is present in terms of the outward appearance, had no more understanding of the nature of the thing than did Aristotle and all subsequent thinkers (1971, 168).

Heidegger’s engagement with Greek thought is characterized by a fundamental resistance to conceiving Being in terms of a principle, idea or as genus. As Richard Palmer notes, in a seminar on Heraclitus, Heidegger draws on the possibility of Heraclitus offering another way to recover the reality of Being, a way that was prior to the Platonic turn to metaphysics and the grounding of Being in *logos* (1979, 80). In the seminar Heidegger poses the question: “What if there be in the Greeks something unthought, and what if precisely this unthought thing be what determines their thinking and what is thought down through history?”ⁱ From this he moves on to interpret the Greek term *Aletheia*, as “disclosure” or “unconcealment” rather than as “truth” interpreted as correspondence to the domain of ideas in Plato. *Aletheia* for him is the bringing to light, the clearing, of that which remains concealed in predominantly analytic modes of relating to the world. Heidegger’s relentless anti-subjectivism, however, does not make him see this process of clearing or coming to light as absolute, as something that once and for all brings things to

the foreground. Clearing is also concealment for there is no stepping outside *Dasein*. The Greeks since Plato, he maintained, could not tap this aspect of what they called “truth”.

In his later works such as Poetry, Language and Thought among others, Heidegger goes on to famously put forward his theory that it is only through language that the human becomes *open* to the extant nature of things, the thing-ness of things, things in their unique singularity. This view of language is different from the shallow, technological connotation of language found in cognitive modes of relating to the world, a connotation grounded in the primacy of the object out there to which language corresponds. For Heidegger language is that which brings the being of things to light. To that extent it is a view of language as a “shaping, projecting, light-shedding structure in which every extant thing is ‘announced’ in a certain way as it is ‘seen’” (Palmer 82, emphasis original). It is in language that the human “worlds” the “earth”. As Heidegger puts it:

Language for the first time names the extant thing, and such naming brings the things to word and appearance for the first time. This naming names the thing *to* its being and *from* it. Such “saying” (*Sagen*) is a kind of projecting of the light in which a thing is to be taken, the light wherein is announced what the thing will come into open *as*.... (1971, 72, emphasis original)

This privilege of clearing provided by language is not available to stones, plants or animals, only to humans. The human, rather than using language as a tool to analytically master the domain of objects – which is the stuff of scientific knowledge – must step back with receptivity and care so as to hear and see the revelation of Being in language. In that sense, language, to cite one of Heidegger’s best known declarations, is the “House of Being” and man in responding to it, in waiting patiently and with all humility for it to bring forth the *earth* from its darkness to the light of the *world*, in his reverent openness to things

in their singularity that language brings forth, becomes not the master of the Universe but the shepherd of Being. Related to this formulation of language (as far removed as possible from any ideas of *correspondence* to a world of *objects*), is Heidegger's notion that "things" appear as "things" only when we *step back* from representational thinking. As he says:

When and in what way do things appear as things? They do not appear by *means* of human making. But neither do they appear without the vigilance of mortals. The first step toward such vigilance is the step back from the thinking that merely represents – that is explains – to the thinking that responds and recalls. The step back from the one thinking to the other is no mere shift of attitude. It can never be any such thing for this reason alone: that all attitudes, including the ways in which they shift, remain committed to the precincts of representational thinking. The step back does, indeed, depart from the sphere of mere attitudes. The step back takes up its residence in a co-responding which, appealed to in the world's being by the world's being answers within itself to that appeal (1971,181-182, emphasis original).

It is because Heidegger reads language in its profoundest manifestation in terms of its world-disclosing power, as that in which man dwells by care and responsiveness to language's shaping of the world, that he characterizes *Aletheia* or unconcealment or Truth as *poetic*. In the process he ends up granting an ontological privilege to poetry and other art forms as the repository of truth:

All art is, as the letting-happen of the arrival of truth of what-is as such, *by nature poetry*. The nature of art, by which both artist and work are governed, is the self-setting of truth into a work (72, emphasis added).

Scholars such as Eagleton have expressed unease at what they see as Heidegger's aestheticization of ontology and eventually ethics. They cannot but see a connection between Heidegger's valorization of the poetic and his enthusiasm in the 1930s for Hitler and fascist ideology. His poignant and evocative interpretation of a Van Gogh painting

(Peasant Shoes), for instance, has been read by Marxist scholars as a romantic yearning for a pastoral world that was giving way to an industrialized Germany in early twentieth century. Eagleton talks of Heidegger's "sententious ruralism" (310) as when the latter writes in the Letter on Humanism: "By virtue of reliability...the peasant woman is made privy to the silent call of the earth; by virtue of the reliability of her equipment she is sure of her world."ⁱⁱ Let us in this context first glance at Heidegger's interpretation of Van Gogh's painting of the peasant shoes:

From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow tread through the far spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the *earth* and is protected in the *world* of the peasant woman (1971, 34, emphasis original).

Another unfavourable interpretation of this passage has been given by Roger Waterhouse who writes that it "smack[s] of romantic bourgeois fantasy, and arrogant condescension towards the dumb beasts [that Heidegger] takes the peasants to be". Heidegger's reading, Waterhouse claims, is on par "with those of the tourist who says, 'But darling, the slums of Napoli were simply *wonderful* - so charmingly picturesque!'" (1981, 203). In both Eagleton's Marxist reading and Waterhouse's scathing reprimand along the same ideological lines, we get a reading of the aesthetic as something that merely sugar-coats/mystifies the grim realities of the human living, obscuring in the process the raw details of human oppression and exploitation. To the extent that both Eagleton and

Waterhouse reduce the aesthetic to the ideological, they would also disapprove of my attempt in this thesis to read the multifarious ways in which caste informs the living of South Asians in broadly aesthetic terms, terms that refuse to subsume all dimensions of caste practice to the domain of the national-political – a domain dominantly marked by the paradigm of social justice and modernization – alone. My critique of social science/secular historical representations of caste is based not on an argument that such interpretations are false, but that they are ultimately not open to ways in which caste shapes people's lives and creates possibilities for living that do not always toe the modernizing line of social scientific analysis. A non-ideological reading of Heidegger's interpretation would be to suggest that he saw the sensuous particularity of the painting – those colours in space – as disclosing the existence of the peasant woman in all its moods and textures. It is not as if he romanticizes the hardship in her life. In fact, in the very first sentence there is a reference to her "toilsome tread". There are further references to bleak winters, non-guarantee of an everyday meal and the menace of death. What he does not do is *objectify* this painting as depicting/representing the harsh social reality of the agricultural world *out there*. Nor does he assume that such harsh social reality can be *softened* by a reading that suggests that the peasant woman, for all the hardship in her life, is in the midst of an earth-shattering, mystical connection with the elemental forces around her. Such a reading would be romantic and idealistic. One could say in response to Eagleton and Waterhouse that Heidegger does not so much aestheticize ontology as ontologize aesthetics. Heidegger's emphasis on ontic concreteness, his concern with being's "thrownness" among *things*, his desire to hold on to the irreducible singularity of *things*, makes him rather foreground the shoe as equipment or tool with which the peasant woman has a pre-analytical, non-instrumentalist relation which the painting shows forth. For him, thus, the painting discloses a truth that is not reducible to any social science proposition. Therein lies

precisely the radicalism of Heidegger's reading of art. He resists a representational reading of any specific work of art, as such work being *about* some aspect of the world. This is, as we can see, analogous to his view of language that does not so much transparently represent through *signs* what is out there but a *thing* that is responsible for worlding the earth. I find Heidegger's reading of Van Gogh's painting, his view of language and poetry and especially his recognition of the ineluctable worldliness of meaning, opening up a space for arguing that the realm of human possibilities for living expands as one moves from social science and secular historical discourses to literature and the arts.

Eagleton suggests that Heidegger's *Dasein* "has about it something of the original, phenomenological connotation of the aesthetic: even if it is hardly a sensuous phenomenon, it inhabits the realms of the affective and the somatic, is marked by its biological finitude and runs up against a density of things irreducible to some abstract reason" (302). Let us take a brief sojourn through those readings of the aesthetic in its "original, phenomenological connotation" in modern thought. In its first stirrings within German philosophy in the eighteenth century the aesthetic was invoked to address not art but the mind-body dualism. More specifically it was seen to address the realm of man's biological or creaturely interaction with the world, an interaction that had the body and its sensations as its locus. This included perceptions, feelings and passions, in short, the whole gamut of man's lived experience that figured as the other of the rarefied domain of reason and cognition. The first German philosopher to use the term, Alexander Baumgarten, reminded his fraternity of the term's Greek etymology, *aisthesis*, which meant not art but human sensation and feeling. From this he extended the use of the term to the realm of concrete particulars that remained opaque to the abstraction of conceptual thought. Baumgarten then went on to give the aesthetic the status of thought that supplemented the

conceptual and the abstract, that in some way, in other words, mediated between the world of sensuous particulars and that of abstract universal laws. In the process, however, he could not but accord the aesthetic a status inferior to that of reason, calling it the “sister” of logic, a kind of “feminine analogue of reason at the lower level of sensational life.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Immanuel Kant takes up Baumgarten’s reading of the aesthetic as something that provides a ground for judgements that are not accessible to abstract reason, but he goes on to accord the aesthetic a much more important position in the epistemological scheme of things than did Baumgarten. In fact, in the Critique of Pure Reason he expressed his disapproval of the way Baumgarten theorized aesthetics:

The Germans are the only people who at present use this word [aesthetics] to indicate what others call the critique of taste. At the foundation of this term lies the disappointed hope, which the eminent analyst, Baumgarten conceived, of subjecting the criticism of the beautiful to principles of reason, and so of elevating its rules into a science. But his endeavours were vain. For the said rules or criteria are, in respect to their sources, merely empirical, consequently never can serve as laws *a priori*, by which our judgement in matters of taste is to be directed. It is rather our judgement which forms the proper test as to the correctness of the principles.^{iv}

But as we shall see, Kant’s monumental project of unifying the entirety of human experience under the sign of Reason, a project that inaugurated Enlightenment thought, faltered on the question of aesthetic judgement or what Kant called “reflective” judgement. Kant’s aesthetic reflection has no connection to what is commonly understood as the study of art objects or a theory of the aesthetic. Rather, it has to do with the realm of the subjective or the realm of the affect that is generally not taken into account by conceptual frameworks associated with cognition and morality. Such reflection does not produce the knowledge of a thing, nor does it lead to productive praxis. Here are Kant’s own words:

I have already stated that an aesthetic judgment is quite unique, and *affords absolutely no (not even a confused,)" knowledge of the Object*. It is only through a logical judgment that we get knowledge. The aesthetic judgment, on the other hand, refers the representation, by which an Object is given, solely to the Subject, and brings to our notice no quality of the object, but only the final form in the determination of the powers of representation engaged upon it. The judgment is called *aesthetic* for the very reason that its determining ground cannot be a concept, but is rather *the feeling (of the internal sense) of the concept in the play of the mental powers as a thing only capable of being felt* (1911, sec 15. 71, emphasis added).

As is well known, Kant agonized throughout his long and distinguished career about the gap that separated the world of nature (what he called "fact") from the world of human experience (what he designated as "value"). The other analogues of this famous Kantian dialectic include cognition and morality, truth and freedom, reason and goodness, epistemology and ethics. Kant could not find any *necessary* connection between the two, any universal law or rational proof that would tell him that whatever exists in this world is also that which has meaning and therefore value, that what is reasonable is also good, that truth necessarily leads to freedom. In his Critique of Judgement, more popularly known as his Third Critique, Kant invokes the notion of reflective judgement (or the aesthetic) as that unique form of judgement that would provide him the base from which he could puzzle over the separation of the worlds of cognition and morality and eventually find a way of connecting them. There was something in reflective judgment's sensitivity to the sensuous, the particular, the qualitative and the contingent that, he argued, could provide a clue to the aporia that confronted him.

Kant noted in the Introduction to his third Critique that his purpose was to show that "the concept of freedom is meant to actualize in the sensible world the end proposed by its

laws". He added that "nature must consequently also be capable of being regarded in such a way that in the conformity to law of its form it at least harmonizes with the possibility of the ends to be effectuated in it according to the laws of freedom" (14). From here he goes on to argue that the division between cognition and morality, or between fact and value can only be *affectively* apprehended by the subject. Such affective apprehension – Kant's examples are pleasure in response to Beauty or pain/wonder/fear in response to the Sublime – has no basis in conceptual thought. As Derrida says in his The Truth in Painting, one can of course have thoughts about the experience of pleasure or pain, but such thoughts arise from the residue or remainder – Derrida calls it *reste* – of one's attempts to conceptualize experience. The immediacy of the experience inevitably eludes them. As Derrida says:

It is this remainder that causes talk, since it is, once again, a question of *discourse* on the beautiful, of discursivity *in* the structure of the beautiful and not only of a discourse supposed to happen accidentally *to* the beautiful (emphasis original)

The affective responses of pleasure or pain, those feelings that accompany and qualify our relationship to cognitive and moral representations, are not amenable to a teleology of cause and effect. This is what makes Kant suggest, for instance, that Beauty can at best *figurate* morality, but that it cannot provide a ground for the latter's necessary connection with nature and the domain of fact and cognition. Many poststructuralist readers of Kant, predominant among them being Derrida, have argued that the aesthetic for Kant is, in the final analysis, a sign of the impossibility of ever finding a *logical* ground for connecting the domains of cognition and morality, of ever being able to state categorically that truth must necessarily lead to freedom, or that whatever is reasonable must also necessarily be good. But if the aesthetic marks such impossibility, if it cannot provide *knowledge* of a

necessary connection between the cognition and morality, it can yet offer us something infinitely richer, “the consciousness beyond all theoretical demonstration, that we are at home in the world because the world is somehow mysteriously designed to suit our capacities.”^{vi} In that sense, the aesthetic could also be read as a non-conceptual sign of the *possibility* of connecting the domains of cognition and morality, of truth and freedom.

Unlike Baumgarten Kant does not accord aesthetic or reflective judgement a status inferior to cognition. On what grounds then does he assert the worth of such judgement? On the grounds of a shared community where such reflection is widespread, and where it features as something more than the purely subjective and individual in terms of *my* pleasure, *my* pain, etc. Aesthetic judgements, he claims, are capable of being shared, and this constitutes the ground of their validity. Here Kant makes a distinction between what is merely an empirical agreement among members of a shared community – what actually happens in the sharing of pleasure over the beautiful – and what he calls the *a priori* ground of “common sense”. The former he puts in the category of experience on whose vicissitudes one can build no categorical imperatives: “apart from the fact that experience would hardly furnish evidences sufficiently numerous for this purpose, empirical judgements do not afford any foundation for a concept of the *necessity* of those judgements” (81, emphasis added). In talking of the latter, that is common sense, we see Kant perform a series of elaborately choreographed cognitive movements to arrive at the conclusion that it provides the “condition of necessity advanced by a judgement of taste” (82). Common sense, he writes, is the “subjective principle” on which judgements of taste are based, and “one which determines what pleases or displeases, by means of feeling only and not through concepts, but yet with universal validity” (82). He goes on to distinguish what he means by common sense from the otherwise normally attributable meaning to it, common

understanding. The latter connotes the operation of cognition. Common sense is non-mentalist. Kant argues that cognition – the creation of a universally apprehended Object sphere – cannot take place without the intervention of common sense. What happens is this: “A given object, through the intervention of *sense*, sets the *imagination* at work on arranging the manifold, and the imagination, in turn, the *understanding* in giving to this arrangement the unity of concepts” (84). To that extent common sense is the “necessary condition of the universal communicability of our knowledge” (84). And since it is the principle that centrally informs aesthetic or reflective judgement, one cannot but agree with Adorno that “despite the programmatic idea of building a bridge between theoretical and practical reason, the faculty of judgement turns out to be *sui generis* in relation to both forms of reason” (1984, 16).

Poststructuralist readers of Kant have emphasized the spectral, figurative, even fictional dimension of Kant’s exposition of common sense and reflective judgement. As Anthony Cascardi writes:

In the problem of aesthetic reflective judgement, Kant’s Enlightenment subject begins to look back from the “as if” position of its lost or presupposed common sense, upon what it has cost to establish the legitimacy of knowledge by means of the systematic separation of value from fact. In so doing Kant finds that the unity of experience can be remembered or projected, not cognitively known or proved, but only felt, and that judgments of taste, which invoke a truly common sense, must operate from a perspective that is itself fictional, figural or “as if” (90).

Cascardi goes on to add that the Enlightenment desire to speak *rationally* and *objectively* about the unity of the world cannot but traffic in discourses that appear antithetical to it, such as the fictional and the figurative. This is what marks the “constitutive opacity” of Kantian thought, an opacity that in the twentieth century led, on the one hand, Habermas to

try and render transparent and bring to a close the dialectic of Enlightenment through his theory of communicative reason, and on the other, Derrida to perceive that critical edge of Kantian thought lay precisely in such opacity and to argue that all structures have a constitutive outside to which we must be responsible. To that extent, Cascardi argues, poststructural thought is *aesthetic* in a very fundamental sense, in the sense of bringing into reckoning the validity of affective modes of apprehension. As he sums up: “The contingency of structures theorized by Laclau and Mouffe, Unger’s contextualist critique of ‘false necessity’, Lyotard’s notion of the *differend*, and Zizek’s analysis of enjoyment as a political factor all represent protracted developments of the indeterminacy that Kant attributes to aesthetic reflective judgment in the third *Critique*”(212).

We saw that the category “aesthetic” was first used in its pre-Kantian sense (in eighteenth century German thought) to bring the realm of the body into reckoning as a source of knowledge. It is an intellectual commonplace that Kant denuded the category of all its corporeality. His treatment of the category aesthetic has thus quite often been referred to as *anaesthetic*, as something that numbs the body of all sensations and feelings. Kant’s categories existed in a realm far removed from the vagaries of human experience. He was more interested in refining what the domain of affect (pleasure/pain) had to offer to the level of the epistemologically Universal; in refining it, in other words, of all its incipient corporeality. Nevertheless, his emphasis on aesthetic judgement as the domain of affect and taste – of the subjective, in short – is of great heuristic value to my argument about the nihilistic dimension of social scientific thought and my examination of texts that attempt to read social phenomena *affectively*.

It was left to four other German thinkers, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger to bring the body back into philosophical reckoning with great originality and conviction. We have already traversed the fundamentals of Heidegger's take on phenomenology and his ontic critique of representational thinking. There is no space in this chapter to launch into a detailed discussion of either Marx's theorization of the sensuousness of the labouring body, or Nietzsche's notion of biopower (which forms one of the cornerstones of Foucault's analysis of western civilization), or even Freud's foregrounding of the desiring body. Where the theoretical parameters of this chapter are concerned, it would suffice to say that Nietzsche's abjuration of metaphysics in favour of the aesthetic, not just as art but as the realm of feelings and intensities, what Terry Eagleton calls his "full-blooded phenomenism" (247) or Deleuze his ability to speak through "affects, intensities, experiences and experiments" (cited in Miller 1994, 194), opens up another space, along with that provided by Heidegger, in which to situate my argument about the significance of an aesthetic mode of reading the heterogeneity of caste in modern South Asia. It is time now to turn to the two texts that I spoke of as providing me the opportunity to explore the aesthetic vis-à-vis caste. I begin with Ranajit Guha's affective account of the death of a lower caste woman in the state of West Bengal in eastern India.

Chandra as Fragment: Subaltern History as Affective History

Guha's essay "Chandra's Death", a poignant narrative of the death of a lower caste woman due to complications arising from a medically unattended abortion, has its genesis in the fragments of a document that he discovered in the archives of the Vishvabharati University in Shantiniketan. It was tucked away as item number 380 in a volume consisting of letters and other scattered documents that purported to present an account of Bengali society. The collection, edited by Panchanan Mandal, is called *Chitthipatre Samajchitra* (1953),

literally “A Picture of Society Through Letters”. The said document from which Guha constructs his narrative is little more than a deposition made before a representative of the state’s legal system by the defendants accused of causing Chandra’s death. Called *ekrar* in the local language, Bengali (the term has its origins in Persian) and dated around 1849,^{vii} it consists of statements made by Brinda Chashin, the victim’s sister who administered the fatal concoction, Bhagaboti Chashin, the victim’s mother and Kalicharan Bagdi, the village quack whose indigenous herbal potion led to Chandra’s death. A bare outline of the course of events that led to Chandra’s death is just about decipherable from these statements. Before we go into the details of Guha’s very own construction of this event, a construction that I argue is both historical and yet one that resists the subsumption of this fragment into a universal history of caste and gender oppression, it would help to know why Chandra was compelled to go through the abortion. Chandra, a young lower caste widow who lived with her deceased husband’s family, had an illicit liaison with her sister-in-law’s (that is, husband’s sister) husband. The pregnancy that resulted from it was threatening to the kinship structures and so her lover Magaram Chasha approached her mother to help Chandra abort her baby. Alternatively he threatened to put her into “*bhek*” where Chandra would have to adopt a “*Boishnob*’s habit” and lead an ascetic life away from the social and kinship structures to which she belonged.^{viii} In other words, Magaram’s threat was one of excommunication. Chandra’s mother, fearful that this threat would actually be carried out, approached Kalicharan Bagdi to provide her with some herbal remedy. The concoction supplied by Kalicharan was given to Chandra by her sister Brinda. Chandra aborted her foetus, but a few hours later lost her own life. Her death, as the *ekrar* testifies, was obviously brought to the notice of the governing authorities, who attempted to construct it as a murder. Nothing, of course, is known about the outcome of the case. As we have seen, all that remains as witness to these events is the fragmented *ekrar*.

Let us now turn to the various stages of Guha's construction of the event. The analysis presented here is underpinned by my argument about the "aesthetic" nature of Guha's narrative, about his ability to flesh it out by weaving into it the affects of pain, pleasure, fear and pity. The final effect is one of granting a tragic singularity to Chandra's death which is inevitably lost if one attempts to reduce it to the level of the ideological or the sociological, by reading it, in other words, as just one among the many sordid cases of caste and gender oppression in colonial India. Let me at the outset state that Guha does not explicitly plan his writing to produce this effect of singularity. In other words, Guha certainly does not set out to *aestheticize* Chandra's death, in the sense of opting to step out of his role as a secular historian. There are two things in the text that tell us so. One is the classification of this piece, in Subaltern Studies V, along with that of Shahid Amin's essay, "Approver's Testimony, Judicial Discourse: The Case of Chauri Chaura", as a history-based critique of the violent abstractions of legal discourse. The blurb on the back cover reads, "The two pieces by Ranajit Guha and Shahid Amin show, in relation to very different contexts, that the function of legal discourse is to trap and define certain events as 'crime' by reducing their range of signification to narrowly defined legalities". The historian, it is suggested, could help provide a context from which a richer, more nuanced reading of the same events could emerge, a reading well nigh impossible in abstract legalese. The second is Guha's admission that his intention in writing the essay was to "reclaim the document for history" (135). What we see in the text is a tussle between the desire to keep the document and the event of Chandra's death as a *fragment* that resists incorporation into a universal narrative of caste and patriarchal oppression – which would abstract from it the lived experience of Chandra and her kin – and weaving the document into a wider ideological narrative of social oppression and injustice. It is this tussle that

informs Guha's critique of conventional historiography. The critique is, in the final analysis, aesthetic.

Guha's criticism of the prevalent modes of history writing does not at the outset make a plea for bringing in the affective dimension in narrating the past. That comes in later. Initially, it is based on the larger argument that informs the scholarship of Subaltern Studies as such, that most South Asian historical scholarship is statist and that it concerns itself with the larger issues that loom on the horizon of the national-political. In the process it tends to, as he says, "ignore the small drama and fine detail of social existence, especially at its lower depths" (138). When he talks of the importance of a critical historiography "bending closer to the ground" and sensitively retrieving "traces of a subaltern life in its passage through time" (138), he appears to be echoing the history-from-below arguments of many social historians around the world. He also notes that such histories are not easy to write, for all that the historian very often has at his disposal are fragments – or as he so evocatively puts it, "residuum of a dismembered past" (139) – for which the historian has to construct a context in order to be able to write a full story. This reflexivity about the craft and narrative in history also echoes many postmodern arguments about the literary and fictive dimension of history writing, dimensions explored in much detail by Hayden White. From here, however, Guha goes on to make a claim for history (over legal discourse) that is not exactly borne out by most historical writing – the ability to weave in the *experiential* dimension into the narrative. He talks of his role as a historian, in the context of the fragmented *ekrar* that he happened to stumble upon, as one of attempting to recover the "peasant voices" that speak in "sobs and whispers" from the will of the State. It is the State that reduces such pain as experienced by Chandra's relatives to the univocality of a legal deposition. As he says:

The narrative in the document violates the actual sequence of what happened in order to conform to the logic of a legal intervention which made the death into a murder, a caring sister into a murderess, all actants in this tragedy into defendants, and what they said in a state of grief into *ekrars*. Construed thus, a matrix of real historical experience was transformed into a matrix of abstract legality (140-1).

In short, to write history is, for Guha, to traffic in affect and experience. The point to note here is that, surprisingly, Guha's critique of abstraction in legal discourse does not extend to abstractions that are part of academic historical and social scientific writing. As Dipesh Chakrabarty's recent book Provincializing Europe tells us, the analytical thrust of such disciplinary formations as history and the social sciences – and in the context of studies of non-Europe, the collusion of such thrust with historicist thought – has rendered such formations unable to incorporate the specificities, the diversities that make up the life-worlds of people around the globe. There is a plea in Chakrabarty's book for making the discipline of history more responsible and caring toward the multiform realities of lived human experience. While Guha does not theorize his position on academic history-writing in such terms, his desire to make space for a tragic narrative of passion gone wrong, for the grief of the protagonists at the unintended death of a beloved family member, can be read as an attempt to counter not only the abstractions of legal discourse, but also those of historical thought itself.

The event of Chandra's death triggers off narratives that operate on different registers in Guha's essay: the historical, the sociological and the aesthetic or literary. The three strands weave into one another and lend the text its tessellated quality. Let us try to extricate each strand at a time. We begin with the historical. Guha's idea of giving the document an historical thickness, a "context" as he puts it, begins with a critique of the other contexts in

which the document had previously existed – those of law and a haphazardly collected series of non-academic written material depicting Bengali society. The first as we saw abstracts all life – the “many-sided and complex tissue of human predicament” (141) – from the event. The second makes no attempt to “situate” the event either. The anthology’s rubric is too broad based to accord the document any sociological or historical specificity. Guha pits his historical expertise against the will of the State that manifests itself in the *ekrar*. His plea is on behalf of a community-based analysis that resists the normative modernity of histories that make the nation-state the locus of study. Homi Bhabha writes: “Community is the antagonist supplement of modernity” (1994, 231). Partha Chatterjee adds that it is the moment of capital that relegates “community” to capital’s prehistory:

If there is one great moment that turns the provincial thought of Europe to universal philosophy, the parochial history of Europe to universal history, it is the moment of capital – capital that is global in its territorial reach and universal in its conceptual domain. It is the narrative of capital that can turn the violence of mercantilist trade, war, genocide, conquest and colonialism into a story of universal progress, development, modernization and freedom. For this narrative to take shape, the destruction of community is fundamental.... Community, in the narrative of capital, becomes relegated to the latter’s prehistory, a natural, prepolitical, primordial stage in social evolution that must be superseded for the journey of freedom and progress to begin (1993, 235).

In order to reclaim Chandra’s death for history, Guha first of all undertakes a study of the Bagdi community to which Chandra and her kin belong. The Bagdis, we are told, are a polluting caste who live on the margins of Bengali society both economically and culturally. The surnames of the protagonists, *Chashini* and *Chashin* (local variations of standard Bengali terms *chashani* and *chasha*, respectively female and male names for “farmer”) reveal their chief occupation, agriculture. The disadvantage of caste and extreme poverty combine to make them the rural proletariat. In a survey undertaken (at around the

same period as the event) in the district from which the protagonists of Guha's story come, the Bagdis, though larger in number than the Brahmins, owned absolutely no land, while the Brahmins owned 72.25 per cent of the land (143). The Bagdis, in short, lived in poverty. The sheer material deprivation of the protagonists is evident at that point in the narration of the event when Chandra's mother offers a brass pot and bowl to the village doctor as payment for the herbs that would help Chandra abort her baby. The doctor demands to be paid in cash. Guha fills out the socio-economic details of this transaction by researching the financial state of landless labourers around the months of March-April in mid-nineteenth century. He finds that that was the toughest period for the rural proletariat for by that time they had exhausted their cash savings derived from their winter harvest and had to rely on more borrowing from moneylenders to meet their day-to-day needs. While they could pledge their metal ware to the money lender in exchange for grain, the more metal ware the creditor accumulated, the less the amount of grain the poor Bagdi peasant received from the lender. Hence the significance of the village quack demanding cash from Chandra's mother and his refusal to accept the brass pot and bowl as payment.

Apart from labouring on lands belonging to the upper castes, the Bagdis also doubled as night watchmen or *lathials*. Yet they were stereotyped by their upper caste masters and landlords as criminals. We also read that Bagdi women were ever so often prey to the lust of the Brahmins. But, as Guha notes, these same women feature in indigenous feudal-patriarchal lores as "lascivious", as women of easy virtue (144). Such stereotypes interestingly reappear in colonial ethnography. Thus H.H. Risley in his The Tribes and Castes of Bengal writes of the "lax views of the Bagdis...on the subject of sexual morality". The Bagdis, according to Risley, "allow their women to live openly with men of

other castes” and are tolerant of “sexual license before marriage” where their young women are concerned.^{ix}

These details serve as a springboard for Guha’s plunge into the narrative of Chandra’s illicit affair, pregnancy and her subsequent fatal abortion. The analysis now moves to the register of the socio-anthropological. What follows are details of kinship patterns among the Bagdis, the control of female sexuality within such patterns, a description of the manner in which the indigenous law-enforcing agencies operate, and the mechanics of caste ostracism. These are informed by a stern and ruthless patriarchal order epitomized in the only statement attributed to Chandra’s lover in the *ekrar*:

I have been involved, for the last four or five months, in an illicit love affair (*ashnai*) with your daughter Chandra Chashnai, as a result of which she has conceived. Bring her to your own house and arrange for some medicine to be administered to her. Or else, I shall put her into *bhek* (137).

Let us take a brief look at Guha’s delineation of the indigenous judicial system and the technologies of caste ostracism with which female sexual transgressors were threatened. Guha notes that the *ekrar* in question was never part of the colonial judicial system. In parallel with the colonial law-enforcing institutions, there operated *ad hoc* caste and village based tribunals that imparted justice on the basis of rules that “were an amalgam of local custom, caste convention, and a rough and ready reading...of the *shastras*” (151). Generally such tribunals handled cases of sexual misconduct and meted out ritualized punishment. The arrangements that went toward making the guilty atone for their sins was called *byabostha*. More often than not they were quite harsh. Since the social arrangements were deeply patriarchal, it was the woman’s sexual purity that was most valued – whether in the form of a maiden’s virginity, or a widow’s chastity or a wife’s sexual fidelity – and

most policed. It was in one such tribunal that Chandra's case was obviously heard. The fear of expulsion from caste was so strong that very often the offenders and their kin themselves went to the tribunal to confess their transgressions. In Chandra's case, her lover ordered her to have an abortion and so destroy all evidence of their illicit love. In this way they would not have to face the *byabostha* at all. The alternative offered was, as we saw from Magaram's statement, "*bhek*". The term, related to the *Vaishnav* cult, connoted a "voluntary withdrawal from the institutions of Brahmanical Hinduism in favour of a way of life inspired by Chaitanya's teachings" (157). The state of being in *bhek* was symbolized sartorially in the form of a shaven head, a mark on the forehead, a long flowing saffron robe or sari, a necklace for telling beads and a waist-band (at the very minimum). But as Magaram's threat indicates, it was a state that could be *enforced* on hapless women whose sexual transgressions were seen to jeopardize kinship relations. And such enforcement indicated that ultimate degradation: loss of caste and ultimately loss of face within the community network. To be in *bhek* connoted for most women a state of being comprehensively abandoned by their kin and community. Further, as sociological studies have indicated, many such women were roped in to becoming *sebadashis* – literally those devoted to the service of God – which was more often than not a euphemism for prostitution. The fear of *bhek* was thus so great that Chandra's family not unnaturally found abortion a much lesser evil.

At this level of the historical and sociological fleshing out of a fragmented document, Guha's efforts are very much in keeping with any social scientific endeavour, that of interpreting an individual event as a particular instance of a general social rule or framework. But in attempting to provide a "context" for the document, Guha goes one step further. He converts the evidence in the document into a tragic tale of love and betrayal,

and of female solidarity that misfired. This is where the narrative acquires an affective dimension. He talks of how the document provides no clue to the “secrets of the heart”, of the fact that Chandra and Magaram were perhaps passionate lovers for a few months before her pregnancy alerted her lover to the possibility of social opprobrium. It was then, perhaps, Guha imagines, that Magaram’s callous and authoritarian side took over as he assumed the role of the custodian of semi-feudal, patriarchal power:

There is nothing remotely of a lover’s sentiment in what he says, no acknowledgement at all of sharing any sexual pleasure with his partner. What comes through is the other male voice – not the one that croons so exquisitely about love in Bengali lyrics – but the disciplinary voice that identifies and indicts an offence against public morality to pronounce: ‘Abortion or *bhek!*’ (156).

The bleeding, dying Chandra brutally rejected by her lover – “betrayed and bleeding, she sees a core of coercion in what she believed was mutual consent and an abstract masculinity in the person she thought was her lover” (164) – is cast by Guha in the image of a tragic heroine, not merely at the mercy of a heartless male-dominated society but at the mercy of inexorable fate itself. She was not meant to die, only to expel the one palpable evidence of illicit love from her body. It is also around her death that was not meant to happen that Guha weaves his story of a grieving sister and mother, members of the Bagdi clan who appeared in the *ekrar* as the prime defendants, and who in a purely sociological reading would appear to have played a merely instrumental role in upholding the patriarchal injunction against sexual laxity.

Guha wrenches Bhagaboti and Brinda away from the stranglehold of an ideological reading that would not grant them any agency, individuality and humanity, and casts them in the role of concerned female relatives who acted not so much to save Chandra’s lover,

Magaram's face and the face of their clan, but the very dignity and humanity of their loved one. Hence the tragic import of Chandra's death. For their love and every effort to stall the devastation staring their loved one in the face were no match for the relentlessness of fate. In Brinda's statement of defence against the charge of murder – "I administered the medicine in the belief that it would terminate her pregnancy and did not realize it would kill her" – Guha makes us read not an attempt by the accused to prove her innocence, but the anguish of a sister whose very attempts to *save* Chandra resulted in the latter's death. He imagines with great empathy the efforts made by the Bagdi women to procure the medication, their care in mixing it with precision, their overwhelming anxiety after they administer the drug, their reaction to the sight of the expelled blood-smearred foetus and their horror and grief when they realize that their beloved Chandra is dying. It is an imagination that is far removed from the detached objectivity and analytical thrust of a secular, academic historiographical enterprise. In the process, what begins as an exercise in social history writing – with Chandra's case featuring merely as a particular illustration of the general degradation of women under a semi-feudal patriarchal social set-up in nineteenth century rural Bengal – is transformed into a narrative where we have a glimpse of the dense and throbbing life-world of a mother and two sisters as they strive to make a life that is meaningful to them amidst all the cruelties of caste and gender discrimination that are hurled at them at every instance. It is in this sense that Guha's attempt to bend closer to the ground to pick up traces of a life in its passage through time becomes an exercise in affective history. It is an attempt that is, in the final analysis, aesthetic, in the sense the term has been used throughout this chapter, as the domain of the subjective and the material that supplements the analytical and the cognitive, and that affirms the myriad possibilities of life itself.

Of Things Small and Tragic: The Poetics of Caste in Roy's Novel

In its narrative Arundhati Roy's novel The God of Small Things has two things in common with the text just discussed. Both deal with the travails of a protagonist who comes from the lowest of rungs in the caste hierarchy. And in both, the main characters experience death in a gruesome, excessively horrific, manner, deaths that are filed away in the abstraction of police and legal records. As is obvious though, the two belong to different genres and disciplines. In keeping with the general argument of this chapter about the abstracting, nihilistic dimension of social scientific writing, a dimension that the category of the aesthetic is seen to counter, I read Roy's novel both as an indictment of the atrocities perpetrated on the hapless population of untouchables in India and as an immense attempt to bring to the fore, to even celebrate in some sense, the dense, full-blooded phenomenology of the untouchable life-world. To cite just two instances illustrating this double movement of the novel, we see Ammu, the untouchable protagonist Velutha's upper caste beloved thinking at one point in the novel: "She hoped that under his careful cloak of cheerfulness, he housed a living breathing anger against the smug ordered world that so raged against it" (176). Early reviewers of the novel in India have commented on the cold deep-set anger and the striking unforgiveness that underscores Roy's depiction of the brutal hypocrisies of Indian society. Yet the novel is far from being propagandist. The anger in it is not that of the rallying-round-a-cause, flag-bearing activist that Roy becomes in her later work on the Sardar Sarovar Project.^x Rather, it is an anger funnelled through an artistic sensibility. The result is a magnificently rich and deep narrative that can be mined as much for social and moral truths as for metaphors that dazzle with the sheer will and love for life. Roy's epigraph to the novel, "Never again will a single story be told as though it's the only one", invokes notions of plenitude and heterogeneity in narration and we plunge headlong into the story of Ammu, her two-egg twins and the untouchable

Velutha amidst the immodestly green and lush country town of Ayemenem on India's southern tip.

There are three aspects of the novel that inform my analysis in this chapter. They are Roy's deployment of the motif of the "small", her treatment of the theme of history and its large abstractions and her depiction of the sensuousness of the labouring body in the figure of Velutha, the untouchable lover. These three aspects entwine to constitute a poetics of modern India that is not so much a narrative of a modernizing, development-oriented society – which is what a sociological critique would focus on in terms of seeing the novel as an indictment against India's social ills – as a depiction of a world in which a deep rooted passion for inequality and hierarchy coexists with a celebration of the small and the inconsequential, of those on the lowest rungs of the many ladders that South Asians attempt to climb throughout their lives. The motif of the *small* in the novel – beginning with the attractive and sensuous Velutha, who as the labouring Paravan is the "God" of the title, and embodied in the narrative in the figure of the two-egg twins of Ammu, Estha and Rahel, from whose point of view the story unfolds – constitutes the axis around which the story revolves. But Roy's is not a strategy of simple subversion where the small take over from the Big and rule the roost. No doubt, as we shall see, she painstakingly documents the sheer ugliness and evil of the Big. Such depiction is, however, touched by a tragic awareness that for the small to adopt a path of confrontation with the Big is to walk the path of certain destruction. And yet, in its very destruction and death, the small in the novel operates as a sign of excess, as something that constantly disrupts the order and flow of the Big things in life, that forever eludes, to quote Tagore once again, "those ghastly abstractions of the organizing man". The small in this sense is aporetic, as is death, the ultimate aesthetic experience of all, one that in its absolute singularity can never be

conceptualized. It is with this aporetic and aesthetic force that the term “death” features in the title of this chapter, as much as it refers, of course, in the most obvious sense, to the deaths of the untouchable protagonists in the two texts under discussion – Chandra and Velutha.

Let us first have a quick glance at the world of the Big in Ayemenem to see what the “small” protagonists in the novel, Ammu, Velutha, Estha and Rahel, are up against. The first is the Syrian Christian community that firmly endorses caste, class and gender inequalities. Converts to Christianity long before even Europe became Christian, this community is seen to nevertheless hold on to its illustrious Nambudiri Brahminical lineage. The senior members of Ammu’s maternal home embody the social power that this community wields in Kerala. Her mother, Mammachi, openly idolizes her male child, Chacko, and considers her divorced daughter with twins as a burden on the family. Her physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her husband merely led her to transfer all her emotions and eroticism to her only son, Chacko. Her own marital experience has not enabled her to empathize with her daughter’s brutalized marital life. Rather, she sees Ammu’s failed marriage as just retribution, for her daughter dared to marry outside her community. Her firm emotional investment in the hierarchies of class, caste and gender is illustrated at several points in the novel. To cite just one of them:

Mammachi’s world was arranged that way. If she was invited to a wedding in Kottayam, she would spend the whole time whispering to whomever she went with, “The bride’s maternal grandfather was my father’s carpenter, Kunjukutty Eapen? His great-grandmother’s sister was just a midwife in Trivandrum. My husband’s family used to own this whole hill” (168).

Mammachi's dead husband, the noted entomologist Shri Benaan John Ipe, (Pappachi to the rest of the family) was a regular tyrant with the family. A man of manic temper, he especially took sadistic pleasure in beating his wife and humiliating her at the slightest of provocations. When his wife's violin teacher in Vienna told him that she was very talented and could easily train to be of concert class, he promptly stopped her lessons. After his retirement, when she took charge, along with her son Chacko, of the family's pickle making business, he would sit on the verandah overlooking the street and play the part of the neglected husband by pretending to sew buttons on his old shirts. Arundhati Roy is relentless in her attempts to portray him as a sadist. The following is her description of Pappachi's photograph that hung from the living room wall:

His light brown eyes were polite, yet maleficent, as though he was making an effort to be civil to the photographer while plotting to murder his wife...he had an elongated dimple on his chin which only served to underline the threat of a lurking manic violence. A sort of contained cruelty...there was a watchful stillness to the photograph that lent an underlying chill to the warm room in which it hung (51).

His sadistic genes are shared in the novel by his sister Baby Kochamma, the grand-aunt and arch enemy of Estha and Rahel. In love with a Catholic priest all her life, a man she obviously could not marry, she spends the rest of her life in her brother's home tormenting the underprivileged and enjoying all the trappings that life amidst well-to-do Syrian Christians can offer. The most fruitful years of her life are those in which she is committed to playing enemy to the divorced Ammu, freshly returned from her failed marriage with her twins Estha and Rahel:

She subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for a *divorced* daughter – according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. As for a *divorced* daughter from a *love* marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma's outrage. As for a *divorced*

daughter from an *intercommunity love* marriage – Baby Kochamma chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject (45-46, emphasis original).

She is the one who single handedly engineers the course of events that leads to the deaths of Velutha and Ammu. She outlives all the adults of her generation in the Ayemenem house and when Rahel visits the house as an adult, she discovers a grand aunt who is “living her life backwards”. At the age of eighty three Baby Kochamma sports a bob cut, dyes her hair jet black, wears lipstick, kohl and rouge, dons Ammu’s dead mother’s jewellery and is addicted to American soaps featuring blond beauties on television. Her presence is grotesque to say the least, and we are reminded that she has overcome none of her animosity toward the twins. In detailing the visit of the adult Rahel to Ayemenem, Roy writes at one point: “The silence sat between grand-niece and baby grand aunt like a third person. A stranger. Swollen. Noxious. Baby Kochamma reminded herself to lock her bedroom door at night” (21). With her poisonous presence she keeps alive for Rahel and Estha the terror that ripped their childhood apart.

The power of Roy’s representation of the tyranny of the Big lies in the sensuous, pre-analytical quality of her writing. This invokes the everyday, lived quality of this deeply hierarchical, menacing society. Thus, for instance, in what is one of the most hair-raising scenes in the novel, when Velutha’s father reveals to Mammachi the truth about his son and her daughter, one of the telling expressions of rage and disgust at this inter-caste affair comes from Baby Kochamma: “*How could she stand the smell? Haven’t you noticed? They have a particular smell, these Paravans*” (257, italics original). Roy then writes: “With that olfactory observation, that specific little detail, the Terror unspooled” (257). That remark by Baby Kochamma makes Mamachhi go berserk as she attempts to visualize

the coupling of a high caste, upper class Syrian Christian woman and a black smelly Paravan: “a Paravan’s coarse black hand on her daughter’s breast. His mouth on hers. His black hips jerking beneath her parted legs. The sound of his breathing. His particular Paravan smell. *Like animals*, Mammachi thought and nearly vomited” (257, italics original). Her rage compels her to lock her daughter up.

The ominous hold that Pappachi, Ammu’s dead entomologist father, has on his doomed family is likewise depicted most powerfully through the tactile presence of the grey furry moth with unusually dense dorsal tufts, that haunts the rest of his family and most intensely, Ammu’s twins. In his lifetime, Pappachi’s “discovery” of this very special variety of moth was not given due recognition. Another entomologist claimed recognition more than a decade later. Pappachi’s fury at this injustice loomed over his family and haunted future generations. One of the most powerful refrains in the novel is that of the moth’s cold wings gripping the hearts of the twins as it flits around the Ayemenem house, with its ghostly self presaging violence and death. The shiver that its cold spectral furriness unleashes on the twins reverberates through the novel. Another instance of the way the brutality of the Big is phenomenologically presented is to be found in the twins’ response to the idea of History. We are told that they have heard its “sickening thud” in the lynching of Velutha in police custody, and have smelt its sick sweet smell in the thickened blood that flowed out of Velutha’s skull, “like old roses on a breeze”(55). Again, many times in the novel the noxious presence of Baby Kochamma is captured through the utterly repulsive ways in which her body expresses itself. Thus, her disapproval and fear of the communist march where she has been told that Velutha was seen is expressed in this way: “Terror, sweat and talcum powder blended into a mauve paste between Baby Kochamma’s rings of neckfat. Spit coagulated into little white gobs at the corners of her mouth” (79).

We are then told that being a firm believer in the social order, what she feared most was dispossession and the chaos that could result from the breaking down of age-old hierarchies. This makes her hostile to communist party marches, to untouchables who are talented carpenters and who dare to participate in these marches, to daughters who marry for love outside their community, who dare to expect family support when their marriages break down and who, worst of all, compromise family dignity by indulging in a clandestine relationship with an untouchable. The Big in the novel is the domain of ironclad laws the transgression of which unleashes devastation of cataclysmic proportions. As Rahel realizes as an adult:

Perhaps, Ammu, Estha and she were the worst transgressors. But it wasn't just them. It was the others too. They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much. The laws that make grandmothers grandmothers, uncles uncles, mothers mothers, cousins cousins, jam jam, and jelly jelly. It was a time when uncles became fathers, mothers lovers, and cousins died and had funerals (31).

We have noted earlier that among the cluster of motifs and images with which the novel is replete, it is the motif of the "small" that constitutes the backbone of the novel. By funnelling the course of events through the imagination of eight-year old twins, Roy creates a world in which adult happenings are refracted through a vision that is relentlessly off-centre. Thus, for instance, in a celebrated scene in the novel, that of Sophie Mol's funeral, the focus is not so much on the somber, tragic mood of the adults, as on the quirky imagination of Rahel: "She noticed that Sophie Mol was awake for her funeral. She showed Rahel two things" (5). The two things are the freshly painted dome of the Church and the baby bat that crawled up Baby Kochamma's expensive funeral sari. As Baby Kochamma responds in fright to the invasion of the bat, Rahel sees Sophie Mol

cartwheeling in glee in her coffin. Again she tells us that she is the only one who can see Sophie Mol screaming in terror and shredding satin with her teeth as her body is lowered into her grave and the mourners throw red mud on the coffin. The sheer playful innocence of Rahel's imagination, given her own full involvement in the tragic event, seems to heighten the terror of Sophie Mol's death by drowning and of all the events that subsequently follow. And that is one of my arguments about the role of the "small" in the novel. The Big in the novel appears all the more menacing when it is featured through the innocuous innocence of the twins' language. Think, for instance, of the horror of the Ayemenem policemen lynching Velutha till he lay bleeding and dying, and juxtaposed with it the language games that Estha and Rahel play when they engage in their favourite pastime of reading backwards the acronymic use of the word "police" on the wall of the police station:

'ssenetiloP', he said, 'ssenetiloP, ecneidebO',
 'ytlayoL', ecnegilletnI', Rahel said.
 'ysetruoC'.
 'ycneiciffE'. (313)

Predictably, the Inspector interprets Estha and Rahel's game as a sign of their trauma. They have after all just witnessed the loss of their cousin by drowning and the clobbering to death of their friend, Velutha. Again, see Roy's sensitivity to language in her depiction of the immediate effect of Velutha's death on the twins:

In the back verandah of the History House, as the man they loved was smashed and broken, Mrs. Eapen and Mrs. Rajagopalachari, Twin Ambassadors of God-knows-what, learned two new lessons.

Lesson Number One:

Blood barely shows on a Black Man (Dum dum)

And

Lesson Number Two:

It smells, though.

Sicksweet.

Like old roses on a breeze. (Dum dum)

(310, italics original)

However, the small in the novel is more than an entity that just offsets the terror of the Big. In such worlding through language as we see in these two examples, the small also acquires a thing-like existence, a density, even an autonomy from its representational function as the social challenger of the Big and the tyrannical in the novel. Language here is a shaping, projecting, light-shedding structure that worlds the earth for the two-egg twins. Roy's writing spectacularly brings forth the phenomenology of language. The twins respond to words that reveal themselves in all their furriness, their goose-bumpiness, their deep-sounding bellness, their semen-and-blood like stickiness, their sour-metal like odour and their swollen, Ayemenem monsoonal dampness. Any number of times in the novel we see them savouring the sheer materiality of language – its sounds, the sequence of letters. Thus their mother Ammu's use of the term *locus standi* is relished as "Locusts Stand I". "Hello all" becomes "Hello wall". Again we see that among the twins' favourite games with language is the way they read words backward. An example of this has just been cited. The numbness that assails Estha after the trauma of Velutha and Ammu's death, and his parting from his twin, a numbness that gradually causes his total and irrevocable withdrawal from the world around him, is most poignantly and powerfully portrayed through loss of language. As an adult Estha has not spoken a word:

Once the quietness arrived, it stayed and spread in Estha. It reached out of his head and enfolded him in its swampy arms. It rocked him to the rhythm of an ancient, foetal heartbeat. It sent its stealthy, suckered tentacles inching along the insides of his skull, hovering the knolls and dells of his memory, dislodging old sentences, whisking them off the tip of his tongue. It stripped his thoughts of the words that described them and left them pared and naked. Unspeakable. Numb (11-12).

Rahel's presence in Ayemenem many years later brings the materiality of the world back to him, but only in the form of sounds in his head, "the sound of passing trains...Traffic, Music. The Stock Market. A dam had burst and savage waters swept everything up in a swirling. Comets, violins, parades, loneliness, clouds, beards, bigots, lists, flags, earthquakes, despair were all swept up in a scrambled swirling" (14-15).

We said earlier on in the chapter that the use of the aesthetic category, in particular as here defined, helps us study untouchable life-worlds in ways that a sociological analysis of caste is incapable of offering. We also spoke about the very specific take on the aesthetic that informs the general argument of this chapter – that the aesthetic is that which helps us bring to the fore the subjective dimension of human experience, the dimension of affect that in its singularity resists the analytical thrust of secular and social scientific analysis. The likelihood of literature and art – in their elaborate sensuousness and sensitivity to both human emotions and to the sheer immediacy and concreteness of human existence – according singularity to various life-forms has also been noted in our discussion of Heidegger. In what follows I want to discuss in some detail the way Arundhati Roy celebrates through the sheer fecundity of words and images the life of the untouchable protagonist, Velutha. One of her intentions is no doubt to accord the world of untouchables a legitimacy – a right to exist as it were on its own terms – that the Big in South Asian society is bent on depriving it of. To that extent the novel is a powerful political statement against caste atrocities and the deeply entrenched hierarchical structures that mark this society. And her portrayal of Velutha can no doubt be considered as yet another statement on the validity of the "small" that constantly disrupts the power of the Big. My point, however, is something else. It is that the power of Roy's portrayal cannot be enclosed within an ideological reading alone. For such a reading, in its deep investment in the

modernization of India, cannot but do violence to the various ways in which the people of India *live* with caste. Arundhati's Roy's portrayal depicts precisely the immediacy of such living. Velutha and his family belong to the untouchable caste of Paravans or toddy tappers in India's southern most state, Kerala. Though Ammu's mother, Mammachi, recollects days from her childhood when Paravans had to completely keep out of the way of the upper castes, she manages to utilize Velutha's carpentry and engineering skills to great advantage. It is she who suggests to Velutha's father that he be sent to the local school for untouchable boys. There, due to a timely and fortuitous visit by a Bavarian carpentry expert, Velutha picks up German carpentry skills that are put to quick and effective use by Mammachi. The distinction of caste is only very subtly maintained as when Velutha makes exquisite wooden toys and then brings them to Ammu by holding them aloft on the palm of his hand so that she does not accidentally touch him while picking the toy up. But the reader is soon made aware this Velutha is a Paravan with a difference. There are other unwritten rules of untouchable behaviour that Velutha inadvertently does not follow, a fact which makes his father anxious:

Vellya Paapen feared for his younger son...it was not *what* he said but the *way* he said it. Not *what* he did, but the *way* he did it.

Perhaps it was just a lack of hesitation. An unwarranted assurance. In the way he walked. The way he held his head. The quiet way he offered suggestions without being asked. Or the quiet way in which he disregarded suggestions without appearing to rebel (76, italics original).

In a mode that talks back to the great Hindu tradition that devalues physical labour, Roy takes great pains to present this labouring untouchable as immensely attractive. From his gleaming brown virility, to his engineering and carpentering expertise, to his deep affection for Ammu's children and to his leftist political leanings, Velutha is a vibrant, sensual presence in the novel. The moment in the novel when "centuries telescope" and History is

“wrong-footed” (176), when Ammu and Velutha discover their strong attraction for each other, that is, Velutha’s body appears to Ammu’s gaze as “contoured and hard. A swimmer’s body. A swimmer-carpenter’s body. Polished on a high-wax body polish” (175). Velutha creates a fulfilling, creative world for himself beside the river, a world to which Ammu and her twins are fatally drawn. He has plenty to offer them: his smile, his affection, his playfulness, a lucky fishing rod and a boat to the children, and his body, heart and soul, his very being, in fact, to Ammu. The following description, a paean to the sensuousness of his labouring body, would, in fact, be close to Marx’s heart, for it was Marx who wrote with great depth and profundity about the aesthetic loss suffered by modern man in the capitalist attempt to abstract labour from the body of the worker.^{xi}

As he rose from the dark river and walked up the stone steps, she saw that the world they stood in was his. That he belonged to it. That it belonged to him. The water. The mud. The trees. The fish. The stars. He moved so easily through it. As she watched him she understood the quality of his beauty. *How his labour had shaped him.* How the wood he fashioned had fashioned him. Each plank he planed, each nail he drove, each thing he made, had moulded him. Had left its stamp on him. Had given him his strength, his supple grace (333-334, emphasis added).

It is this desirable labouring body that unsettles the abstract laws that govern the society of Ayemenem. It is no coincidence that the mutilation of this body literally takes place at the hands of law enforcing personnel from whom every iota of human emotion has been abstracted:

Blue-lipped and dinner-plate-eyed, they [i.e. the twins] watched, mesmerized by something that they sensed but didn’t understand: the absence of caprice in what the policemen did. *The abyss where anger should have been. The sober, steady brutality, the economy of it all....*

The twins were too young to know that these were only history’s henchmen. Sent to square books and collect the dues from those who broke its laws (308, emphasis added).

The quick economy with which Velutha's body is disposed is quite in keeping with the way the abstract power of law operates. In our discussion of "Chandra's Death" we saw precisely this abstraction from which the historian attempts to rescue the singularity of Chandra's agonizing experience and her death. In giving this experiential dimension central place in his narrative, in treating Chandra's death as something that exceeds the abstractions of both law and ideology, Guha's piece becomes an exercise in affective history. In what way, it would be pertinent to ask, does Arundhati Roy attempt to retrieve the singularity of Velutha's death so that what the reader is left with is not merely another tale of atrocity against an untouchable and the viciousness of caste hierarchy, but also a sense that here was a life lived in its full intensity, a life that had its own unique engagement with the world around it and the passing of which was something to be mourned? We have already seen some of the ways in which Roy renders the character of Velutha desirable. In juxtaposing his death with a sequence of events from the *Mahabharata* – Estha and Rahel watch a *Kathakali* performance of the gruesome slaying of Dushasana at the hands of Bhima and their minds revert to the brutal killing they had witnessed as children on the verandah of the History house – Roy enacts Velutha's lynching by the police as a major ritual in the time of history:

What Esthappen and Rahel witnessed that morning, though they didn't know it then, was a clinical demonstration in controlled conditions (this was not war after all, or genocide) of human nature's pursuit of ascendancy. Structure. Order. Complete monopoly. It was human history masquerading as God's Purpose, revealing herself to an under-age audience.

There was nothing accidental about what happened that morning. Nothing *incidental*. It was no stray mugging or personal settling of scores. This was an era imprinting itself on those who lived in it.

History in live performance.

(309, italics original).

But this “live performance” of History, of the Big, of man’s grand abstractions is not what brings the novel to its close. In a playing out of the excessive or aporetic power of the small, a power that resists closure, The God of Small Things ends with a plunge into the dense and intense, yet the small and fragile immediacy of living. In what is one of the most poetic scenes in the novel, the reader is an intimate witness not only to Ammu and Velutha’s exquisite lovemaking, but also to the sheer contingency of their love and lives. Roy captures beautifully the moment when the untouchable, away from the contempt and condescension of upper caste society, really *lives*: “Then carpenter’s hands lifted her hips and an untouchable tongue touched the innermost part of her” (337). Theirs is not a love that can give them the strength to plan a future together. There is no way they can make inroads into what humanity considers the Big. They can at the most imagine the next day – “*Naaley*”, tomorrow. This heightens their sensitivity to every moment of their togetherness. What we are left with is the poetry of the small in its aporetic fragility and tragic transience:

They laughed at ant-bites on each other’s bottoms. At clumsy caterpillars sliding off the ends of leaves, at overturned beetles that couldn’t right themselves. At the pair of small fish that always sought Velutha out in the river and bit him. At a particularly devout praying mantis. At the minute spider who lived in a crack in the wall of the back verandah of the History House and camouflaged himself by covering his body with bits of rubbish – a sliver of wasp wing. Part of a cobweb. Dust. Leaf rot. The empty thorax of a dead bee (338-9).

ⁱ See Richard Palmer, “The Postmodernity of Heidegger”, William Spanos, ed., Martin Heidegger and the Question of Literature: Toward a Postmodern Literary Hermeneutics, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 81.

ⁱⁱ Cited in Terry Eagleton, The Ideology of the Aesthetic, (London: Blackwell, 1990), 307.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Eagleton, The Ideology of the Aesthetic, 16.

^{iv} Cited in James Creed Meredith, “Last Stages of the Development of Kant’s Critique of Taste”, Kant’s Critique of Aesthetic Judgement, trans. James Creed Meredith, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), p. xxxvii.

^v Eagleton notes that the term “confused” is used in Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica* (1750) to connote not a muddle or a mix up, but a fusion of sense and reason: “In their organic interpretation, the elements of aesthetic representation resist that discrimination into discrete units which is the characteristic of conceptual thought. But this does not mean that such representations are obscure: on the contrary the more ‘confused’ they are – the more unity-in-variety they attain – the more clear, perfect and determinate they become” (15). Kant, it would appear, uses the term in similar fashion.

^{vi} See Eagleton, 85, for a further exposition of the hypothetical – “as if” – base of such belief that the aesthetic generates in us.

^{vii} See Guha, “Chandra’s Death”, Subaltern Studies V, 135.

^{viii} We shall look into the various socio-cultural dimensions of going into “*bhek*” later in the chapter when we examine Guha’s attempt at a socio-anthropological reconstruction of the event.

^{ix} Cited in Guha, 144.

^x See Roy’s The Cost of Living (London: Flamingo, 1999).

^{xi} See especially his “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts” (1844), Karl Marx: Early Writings, Intro. Lucio Colletti, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992).

CONCLUSION

Struggling with and for the dispossessed involves a peculiar kind of struggle: namely, a struggle for an affirmation of life on the other side of hostility and the spirit of revenge.

Fred Dallmayr

That every closure is but provisional and incomplete is a cliché that has done more than its share of requisite rounds of the academia, especially in late modernity. In bringing my project on a subject as wide-ranging and complex as caste to a close, I risk the reader's ennui once more by very honestly admitting that what I have to offer at this last stage in my project can be read as but a gesture marking the deferral of a boxed and tied up statement on that bewilderingly and exasperatingly pluralized social arrangement that goes by the name of "caste" in South Asia.

All I have to offer as closing remarks in the context of my exposition on caste as life-form, are a few thoughts about the rather uneasy way in which it sits beside most discussions about the "politics" of caste in modern India. To even suggest that we should be open to pluralizing our reading of caste as so many ways of living and dwelling, as something that is, in other words, more than just an exploitative social mechanism that needs to be weeded out, is to run the risk of being considered an apologist for the caste system. As I have said at one stage in my thesis, if one desires to intervene in any public debate about caste, and wants one's intervention to be heard and not shouted down, one cannot not begin with the proposition that the caste system is inherently bad. To say anything otherwise – even if one does not go for its diametrical opposite, "good" – is risky. Labels of "reactionary" or "neo-traditionalist" quickly make their adhesive way to the backs of such statements. The

modernizing desire to first reify caste as a relic of times past, and then to annihilate it, is truly alive and well. In the Indian context, and especially in the context of caste, the linkages between the social sciences and modernized nation building continue to be almost as strong as they were during the Nehruvian era. M.N. Panini, a political economist, writes in a recent book on caste edited by M.N. Srinivasⁱ:

Despite sweeping changes in economic policy the caste system is unlikely to wither away and...at least in the short term, is likely to slow down the pace of economic reforms (30).

Such anxious observations are, of course, tempered by a resigned acceptance of the knowledge that caste is now an inalienable component of national body politic. This is also what prompts M.N. Srinivas, in his introduction to the same volume, to take seriously into reckoning the following statement by another social scientist, Jayaram:

Caste is not being abolished...but made to stand on its head...one can argue that castes and the caste system can survive the purity-impurity ideology, and the institution of caste can even survive Hinduism (xiii).

Many social scientists are now engaged in interesting projects that trace what Rajni Kothari has called the "politicization of caste" in late twentieth century India (1970, 4-5).ⁱⁱ Kothari spells out the two questions that broadly frame their projects: "What form is caste taking under the impact of modern politics, and what form is politics taking in a caste-oriented society?" (4). The idea of the political in such analyses is seen solely in terms of subject-centred, strategic concepts. It is also relentlessly presentist. As Kothari says:

Politics is a competitive enterprise, its purpose is the acquisition of power for the realization of certain goals, and its process is one of identifying and manipulating existing and emerging allegiances in order to mobilize and consolidate positions (4).

Interventions in the caste debate by dalit-bahujan intellectuals and activists in recent years also partake of precisely this notion of the political, of the idea that they need to shore up their constituency, economically, electorally and culturally, in order to be able to make a difference in the balance of caste-class power on the national scenario. They attempt to turn their degraded caste status under the Hindu-Brahmanic hierarchy on its head by claiming that it is the dalit-bahujan way of life that can constitute the paradigm for the socio-cultural reconstruction of the Indian nation. Such is the message of Kancha Ilaiah's polemical tract, Why I am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy (1996). The irony of Ilaiah's vision of dalitizing India is that it is a replication of the dream of the early secular, upper caste nationalists such as Nehru – that India be a scientifically and technologically advanced socialist democratic republic. The only difference is that Ilaiah suggests (without a trace of what a social anthropologist would call empirical evidence) that it is the dalit-bahujan masses and not the Hindu Brahmin bourgeoisie who embody these values in their everyday lives. His project of dalitizing India is as pedagogical as that of the modernizing projects of the nationalists. To the extent that he conceives of dalit-bahujan politics only in terms of turning the hierarchy on its head and of putting “those Brahmins” in their place – “We must shout ‘we hate Hinduism, we hate Brahminism, we love our culture and more than anything, we love ourselves’” (132) – Ilaiah is able to theorize the politics of caste and dalitness only in terms of retribution and *ressentiment*.

As will by now be obvious from the eight chapters that constitute the thesis, what I offer is not an endorsement of either the caste-system or casteism, but a resistance to the reified ways in which caste continues to figure in social scientific and nation-building discourses. As Jayant Lele once put it, it is important to recognize “the enormous complexity of a

civilization that is five thousand years old and of the adolescent quality of the framework into which modernization theory has tried to force it" (1993, 53). Again, when I invoke the "political" vis-à-vis caste, I first of all mark the inability of secular, institutional, presentist and pedagogical interpretations of the term to account for all dimensions of human exploitation and oppression. Marx did suggest, as we noted in chapter three, that the idea of the political in its post-Enlightenment avatar – as the domain of statecraft and governance – cannot begin to exhaust all issues related to human emancipation. In the process I, of course, do not discount the importance of the playing out of caste politics in the national-political domain. I only suggest that we also be sensitive to those dimensions of caste-based life forms that continue to be forged in languages/registers long since delegitimated as "backward" or "pre-modern" by the paraphernalia of political modernity and societal modernization. It is meaningless to talk of the "politics" of a social arrangement that has spanned millennia if one does not take into reckoning the heterotemporality of the practices it continues to generate. I end by invoking that great exponent of double-consciousness, W.E. Du Bois, who evocatively captures the yawning gap between the possibilities and mysteries of human existence and the scientific pretensions of modern knowledge formations:

So woefully unorganized is sociological knowledge that the meaning of progress, the meaning of swift and slow in human doing, and the limits of human perfectibility, are veiled, unanswered sphinxes on the shores of science (1969, 275).

ⁱ "The Political Economy of Caste", *Caste: Its Twentieth Century Avatar*, ed. M.N. Srinivas (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 28-67.

ⁱⁱ See *Caste in Indian Politics*, ed. R.Kothari, (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1970).

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