

## **A Critique of Muslim Orthodoxy and Inter-communal Tensions in Hamid Dalwai's *Indhan***

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### **Abstract**

The present paper intends to offer a critical reading of Hamid Dalwai's celebrated novel *Indhan* (1965) as “a critique of Muslim orthodoxy and inter-communal tensions”. This classic Marathi narrative has acquired the status of pan-Indian masterpiece after its brilliant English translation under the title *Fuel* by the renowned translator Dilip Chitre (1938-2009). The novel offers a deeply perceptive view of small-town life in rural Konkan and the emerging inter-communal tensions. The references to key historical events and time-markers in the narration help in contextualizing this novel in larger perspective and making it a pan-Indian masterpiece deserving to be placed among the immortal literary classics like Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* (1956), Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* (1973), Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* (1975).

**Keywords-** Orthodoxy, Communal disharmony, Socialist ideology, Beliefs and Practices

Hamid Dalwai (1932-1977) has rightly been called as ‘the last modernist’ by Ramchandra Guha in his seminal book *Makers of Modern India* (2011) and included him, most deservedly, among the 19 great Indian leaders. As an activist Muslim writer in Maharashtra, he is distinguished from his fellow contemporaries like Bhau Padhye, Bhalchandra Nemade and Baburao Bagul on account of his reformist stance and socialist ideology marked by superb artistic control and restrained compassion. His abiding commitment to lofty ideals of humanity and progressive thinking is clearly evident in his stories and a host of other writings. His numerous stories collected in anthology *Laat* (*The Wave*, 1961), the classic novel *Indhan* (*Fuel*, 1965), *Muslim Politics in India* (1968) and *Rashtriya Ekatmata aani Bhartiya Musalman* (*National Unity and Indian Muslim*, 1977) testify his unflinching devotion to India's

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pluralistic ethos and secular foundations. What his friend and translator, Dilip Chitre designated him one of his interviews “The Angry Young Secularist” gets justified even through a casual glance of his only novel *Indhan* and short-stories like *Kafanchor* (The Shroud Stealer), *Daha Rupayachi Goshta* (Ten Rupee Note), *Ahmed* and *Khuda Hafiz* (Good bye).

The present paper intends to offer a critical reading of Hamid Dalwai's celebrated novel *Indhan* (1965) as “a critique of Muslim orthodoxy and inter-communal tensions”. This classic Marathi narrative has acquired the status of pan-Indian masterpiece after its brilliant English translation under the title *Fuel* by the renowned translator Dilip Chitre (1938-2009). It was written when Partition and its horrors were not yet two decades past, and it is a sobering reminder of how human beings can be brought to collective derangement by real or perceived provocations, stunningly relevant in the present times also. As Ramchandra Guha has observed rightly in one of his interviews; “But Dalwai’s real significance struck me in the post 9/11 global world and given the crisis Islam is facing now. He speaks to that issue. He and Ram Mohan Roy are complementary figures because both were fighting the prevalent orthodoxy of their time” (*The Sunday Guardian*).

The novel depicts how the real victims of all sectarian violence are always the ill-fated common folk, irrespective of their faith, caste and class. The fuel of the title might be thought of as the massive incendiary power under some circumstances of a single human action or gesture. It offers a deeply perceptive view of small-town life in rural Konkan and the emerging inter-communal tensions. The references to key historical events and time-markers in the narration help in contextualizing this novel in larger perspective and making it a pan-Indian masterpiece deserving to be placed among the immortal literary classics like Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan*, Amrita Pritam’s *Pinjar* (1956), Bhisham Sahni’s *Tamas* (1973), Chaman Nahal’s *Azadi* (1975). Like the novel’s author himself, the narrator-protagonist is a Marathi-speaking Muslim from the rural Konkan coast of Maharashtra. He has evolved into an atheist, a liberal, a humanist and a socialist activist committed to a secular democratic India. However, his relationship with his family, the local Muslim community and the larger society surrounding him is full of latent conflicts and contradictions. His modern viewpoint prevents him from assimilating into his society and also from carrying his community with him. He moves in his own society as an outsider.

The novel presents the mental tensions of the educated emanating from their progressive values and reformative ideas. Dalwai advocates the characteristic Indian spirit of religious tolerance and

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brotherhood amidst the diversity of every sort. Following the tradition set by Mahatma Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890) in the 19th century and carried forward by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) and Ram Manohar Lohiya (1910-1967) in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dalwai tried to modernize the Muslim community blinded by the orthodox beliefs of their maulvis and mullahs. He dreamt of an egalitarian Indian society grounded in the universal values cutting across sectarian beliefs and religious practices. He could not bear the obscurantism which made members of his family and his community to cling to obsolete beliefs and medieval ways of thinking in the contemporary world. He believed they were refusing to participate in the making of a forward-looking pluralistic society enriched by diverse traditions that transcended a single religious world-view.

The novel also defines through repeated references and other clues in its narration to historical period in which it is set. The narrator has left his hometown for Mumbai about three or four years after India became independent in 1947. The Partition of India in 1947 is one of the key time-makers used in the narrative. The narrator's long stay in Mumbai far away from his native village is highlighted as a marker between his early life and memories of the hometown and the changes and continuities he perceives on his return. The local community life described in this novel is very peculiar to the Konkan region. So, the readers must ignore the stereotypes of 'Muslim' and 'Hindu' communities elsewhere in India or even in Maharashtra at least temporarily. The Muslims of this part of the Konkan coast were traditionally rich land-owners who used Hindu bonded labour as share-croppers. They were known as the 'khots' (there were also Hindu 'khots' in the Konkan; it is a 'class' label and not a 'caste' or 'community' tag). The other main communities are 'the Hindus' who include a tiny minority of Brahmins, the Marathas, the *Kulvadis*, and the *Nhavis* (the caste of barbers) and the Dalits or *Shudras*.

The novel *Indhan* delineates the diversely stratified and pluralistic Indian society placing a Muslim family at the centre. While presenting a socio-cultural graph of small-town life in rural Konkan with mixed locality and inter-communal tensions, it advocates an accommodative and assimilatory perspective represented by the Muslim narrator-protagonist. His rationally liberal and democratic view of society separates him from both the Muslim and the Hindu characters in this narrative. His compassion for his family and community does not blind him to the flaws in their thinking and their knee-jerk reflexes to situations. He has a larger sense of society that includes the Hindus but those Hindus, too, are by and large communal and regard the Muslims as 'others'. The novel juxtaposes his reformative stance with the backwardness of his community thriving on ignorance and orthodox attitudes. This juxtaposition leads to

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communal tensions and clash of interests culminating in the eruption of communal riots during the annual folk-festival of *palkhi* procession.

There are many incidents than can spark off communal strife .One of such explosive incidents is the depiction of a high caste Brahmin woman named Sumati trying to seduce the bachelor protagonist-narrator after having had a long affair with his married elder brother named Isaak. As Dilip Chitre observes in one of his interviews rightly:

This really proved to be ‘Fuel’: the orthodox Muslims in the author’s native village instigated the orthodox Hindus to protest. Together, the entire orthodoxy boycotted and persecuted his eighty year old father. Such is the fear of pollution and such are the notions of parallel purity and compartmentalized ‘co-existence’ in communalist India in the nineteen-sixties. (Chitre, 2002: 130)

The novel portrays vividly the world and the internal dynamics of a small town inhabited by several different communities separated by religion and caste. The suppression and exploitation of women in his village, especially his Muslim society saddens him. There is open infidelity in the town, but a spark is ignited when a divorced Buddha woman willingly begins to stay with a Muslim.

The novel’s central concern is religious strife, and man's inherent tribalism, which in times of crisis leads him to conceive of the most barbaric deeds. Dilip Chitre has suggested the novel’s entire story quoting four highly relevant lines by the Jnanpeeth awardee, Punjabi writer Amrita Pritam (1919-2005) as an inscription to its English version:

Who can guess?  
How difficult it is  
To nurse barbarity in one’s belly  
To consume the body and burn the bones?

Dr. Ravindra Thakur has summed up the complex world presented in the novel in his highly acclaimed book *Marathi Kadambari: Samajshstriya Samiksha* (2007) thus:

*Indhan* deserves to be called ‘a thought- provoking narrative written by a committed social activist’. It records the changing scenario of a small Konkani village, the Hindu-Muslim tensions, the growing discord among the Buddhists and upper caste Hindus through the first person narration of a young, sensitive Muslim inspired by nationalist and progressive thoughts. His fifteen years stay in Mumbai on medical grounds turns him a complete outsider in his own family

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and community. His plight amidst such adverse circumstances presents a striking contrast between the communal harmony in his village prior to his Mumbai visit and the growing disharmony and tensions after his return. The depiction of the arrogance on the part of village Muslims, now devoid of *khoti* (their landless status), the angry *Kunbis* -share croppers' and the awakened Buddhists refusing to obey the upper castes have been portrayed with supreme artistic skill and rare objectivity. (Thakur, 2007:304, *My translation*)

The main 'scene' where most events and incidents take place is again not named but simply referred to as 'my hometown', 'the town', 'our hometown' etcetra . However, the author has described the landscape and the regional cycle of seasons so unmistakably that Marathi readers will have no difficulty in placing it on the Konkan coast and near Chiplun—the author's hometown in real life. Non-Marathi readers of this translations—*Fuel* in English— can easily locate Konkan and Chiplun on the Arabian Sea coast of Maharashtra. Traditionally, Indian communities functioned within each region with a set of unwritten rules governing their common public life and showed tolerance for each other's beliefs and rituals.

The novel abounds in the descriptions of many such incidents of mutual respect and communal harmony. We find the mention of Muslim women offering an 'ulfah' or 'food offering' to the palanquin of the local Goddess of the Hindus and the Hindus taking care not to offend Muslim religious sentiments by stopping the music accompanying the palanquin procession while passing the town's mosques. But the climatic explosion of the inter-communal tensions and apprehensions into a communal riot is the most dramatic event in this narrative. The boundaries that were delicately maintained between and among the local communities are violently transgressed in the riot. A number of symbolic violations of inter-communal code take place prior to the Muslim attack on the 'palkhi' procession and the rape of several women participating in the festivities. These Muslims are themselves not members of local Muslim community. They have been brought in at the behest of some local Muslims including one who is an immigrant to South Africa on a home visit to Konkan.

The women molested and raped in the riots belong to every community in the town. Traumatically for the narrator himself as well as for any readers who might look at novel from a Muslim perspective, the narrator's own sister-in-law is among those raped during riot. The narrator's *Bhabhi* is a Muslim housewife who defies the Muslim men folk's stern instruction to Muslim women not to present the traditional 'ulfah' or food offering to the local Hindu goddess' procession. She is raped by Muslim

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rioters ‘imported’ from another place who are strangers to the town. The point is that this is not an accident but the inevitable outcome of the communalist and sexist leanings of virtually all the men presented in the novel. The novelist projects women as the final victim of man-made communalism: he shoes racism and fascism as products of male sexism and chauvinism itself, if not as its integral component.

The narrator's beliefs were at odds with those of his family, one of a community of prosperous Khots or landowners. Not only is he an atheist, in the years preceding his departure from the village he tacitly supported the program of land reform that worked in favour of the town sharecroppers and against his own class interests. Now a heart attack has left the narrator in fragile health, and he returns not just to recuperate but also to resume the relationships whose call he has ignored for so long. His father does not even recognise him; his brother has himself aged remarkably, and the narrator is struck by guilt on seeing him: "He carried the added burden of the duties I shrugged off, along with his own. His situation had been like one of a pair of bullocks pulling a cart, finding the other reluctant to budge" (*Fuel*, 2002:5).

This captivating narrative describes the narrator's quest and longing for the earlier harmony through his meetings of the villagers across caste and religious lines. His meeting with Sumati elaborates the changes during his considerably long stay in Mumbai. Her wish of eating biryani at his place presents a sharp contrast between the earlier pattern of the villager's living and the transformed one. She used to maintain ‘purity’ through her denial to accept anything from others, mainly belonging to other caste or religion. There is a very pointed reference to Puritanism prevalent in his village. She replied thus: “It’s now ten years since Gunavanta died...And before he died, he visited the houses of Muslim ‘Khots’ several times for financial help. You have been cut off from the town. It is no longer unusual here for people of the two communities to visit one another’s houses and even to eat together” (*Fuel*, 2002:27).

Her contemptuous tone of voice becomes even more sarcastic thus: “It is you who surprise me. You’ve been living in the big city for years now. You bask in the limelight as a leader. You preach social change. You spin yarns about a revolution. And now why should— of all people—sneer at these changes?” (*Fuel*, 2002:27). The communal tensions and violence have been an everyday matter in the village. The narrator's brother was attacked by the farm workers on fixed wages known as *Kulvadis* out of the old grudges against the abusive Khot who kept abusing them. The narrator is fed up with his abortive attempts for a settlement several times in the past: “If there was going to be an explosion, let there be an explosion! If it was going to incinerate me, let me be incinerated in it too...” (*Fuel*, 2002: 38)

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The novel combines traditional novelistic technique with modernist elements that disorient the reader. The narrator's father admonishing him for his preoccupation with politics- "Izzis all ya'd do in ya life? An' earn nothin'? Not feed yo'self? Not feed yo' family?" is a surprisingly successful move reminiscent of the local dialects with similarly crooked pronunciation. Thus, the narrator's atheism became a matter of mockery throughout the village and even his family was taunted because of his non-beliefs. Matters escalate between the two communities when Issak, an immigrant from South Africa on a home visit to Konkan gets a house constructed in which the labourers were Mahars and Kunbis. He gets involved with a woman Lakshmi, a Mahar. After his house is completed he performs a 'gyarvi'. He invited the entire Muslim neighbourhood for a feast on the chosen day including the narrator but mocks him too: "Ya didn' go join the 'gyarvi' singin? That's no surprise. You don' perform 'namaaz' an you don't observe th' rozas either!"... But tell me—why don' ya recite 'gyarvi'? Don' you have faith in the 'deen'- in Islam? Why not?" (Fuel, 2002: 69-70)

The rivalry got multiplied as the Mahars took Lakshmi back forcibly from Isaak's house. The Muslims had a meeting in which the narrator did not participate. They demanded an apology from the *Kulvadis* compounding the situation and the narrator's tensions: "A lot had changed in the last fifteen years. Time's whirlwind had swept away a lot of good along with the bad during that space. And I feared both the better and the worse that it brought in its wake. I found myself on the side of the status quo. I did not know what I myself wanted" (Fuel, 2002:73). There seems no possibility of compromise between the Muslims and *Kulvadis* making the relations strained with increased tensions:

Gradually the whole town was caught in that whirlwind. Customers at Shamsu's shop decreased and stopped visiting altogether. His shop was close to Mahar quarter. It was on the edge of the Muslim quarter. All his customers were the *Kulvadis* and the Buddhists. They stopped coming to his shop and he just sat there swatting flies with a worried face. (Fuel, 2002:83)

The whole atmosphere turned violent and full of mutual hatred and suspicion. There were rumours of Hindu Muslim clash in the town on the occasion of the Shimga procession. The long tradition of offering 'ulfo' by the Muslims was about to break, but the narrator's Bhabi goes to make an offering. But she gets caught up in the riot.

The novel reaches a climax in a riot in which outrages are visited on one community by goons recruited by the other; the narrator runs helter-skelter trying to save his own people, but of course he has alliances on both sides. An uneasy peace is enforced by the police, and the process of judicial enquiry



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begins. The narrator, sickened by all he has seen, leaves again for the city- the novel begins and ends with a bus ride. But even though the narrator has left his hometown behind, he continues to speak of the various players in the drama and their fates, and his narration shifts into the future tense. Is this what really happened, or is this what he is dreaming will happen?

To recapitulate, the novel probes deeper into the complexity of Indian society “which is among the world’s most complex owing to its plurality, multiculturalism, and volatile dynamics. It has a variety of human forces acting upon one another, creating a political hyperspace with a pervasive uncertainty”(Fuel,2002:ix).While condemning the religious orthodoxy and resultant inter-communal tensions, it explores the delicate emotional bond between the narrator and Sumati amidst the tensed and violently disturbed socio-cultural milieu in his village. What Dilip Chitre observed in his “Translator’s View” is worth-recalling in the end: “He is neither a friend of the Hindus nor an enemy of the Muslims. He is someone who is aware of the contemporary world and the many issues it still has to settle with the plurality of traditions it is heir to. He mirrors a conflict that is not yet resolved thirty-seven years after he wrote his little literary masterpiece (Fuel,2002:xvi).

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