Part I
History, Novel and Desire
"History" here is probably a catachresis for I have no intention of detailing chronologies of any sort. What I attempt instead is a broad-brushed treatment of texts and contexts that will serve as a productive mise en scène for my proposed studies in Part Two. More specifically, this segment thesis espouses a two-pronged agenda. On the one hand, it contends with some of the multiple fictions that delineate desire. On the other, it explores the complex of desires for a specific kind of fiction, i.e., the novel. Desire as certain fictions composed, and, fiction as certain desires in/formed thus, is not an inappropriate description of its central concerns. For purposes of greater clarity I have divided this part into two chapters. The first is a singularly interested mélange of creative, mythic and philosophical inscriptions of "desire" which pre-date the novel form, and their imbrications in the taxonomies of gender relations. The second chapter is a shorthand biography of the novel as a literary genre in India. It will provide an abbreviated gloss on the emergence and subsequent development of the Indian novel as the function and figuration of certain conducive, inducive and propulsive desires. As for fact and fiction, they are not understood as polar opposites. Rather, I take a Blake out of Ramanujan to say, "Whatever is proven today was once imagined" (William Blake as qtd. in Ramanujan, "Towards an Anthology of City Images" 53). And just to round off the thought, that whatever is fact today could well be the fiction, farce, fetish or fantasy of tomorrow.
Chapter I: Pretexts of Desire

In trying to follow the pretexts of desire this chapter itself becomes a pretext for what follows.

My aim here is to muster some sort of working understanding of the subject of desire. Instead of trying to route my efforts to that end through the obvious question "what is desire," however, I opt for a slightly more discursive approach—one that clarifies through a sensitivity to the many relations of desire. Clearly, what I am not trying to do is either script an exhaustive history of desire or distil a definitive ontology for it. My attempt is only to highlight some of the narrative weaves of desire—specifically as they pattern the socio-cultural fabric of pre-colonial India; in other words, to acknowledge the multiplicity of ways in which desire has been mythicised, theorised, and realised. Alternatively, it is to register the plurality of ways in which these relations of desire are implicated in that other subject of desire—the one that speaks, is spoken of, is spoken for, by and/or in desire. Ergo, this chapter also entails a necessary engagement with the politics of gender representation, authorisation, organisation, socialisation and/or manipulation.55

Desire, as mentioned earlier, has found varied understandings in different cultures at different times.56 This is just as true of the Indian context. For instance, one classification identifies two broad types of desire, "desire for the fruit (which is either pleasure or absence of pain) and desire for the means to achieve the fruit" (Mohanty 67). Another recognises eight kinds of desire, viz.,

\[ kama \text{ (desire for erotic pleasure), } abhilashah \text{ (eagerness to possess something), } \\
\text{ragah (desire to enjoy a thing again and again), } sankalpah \text{ (resolution), karunyam} \]

(desire to eliminate the other's pain, in complete disregard of one's own interest),

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55 Seeing as how a subject has almost always, at least till date, been also a gendered subject, whether explicitly or implicitly.

56 To say this is not to ascribe lexical and semantic durability to the word itself. However, it is an acknowledgement of the contemporary facility of the concept signified by the word to accommodate a bewildering range of emotions, impulses, actions and ideas across cultures and times.
vairagyam (desire to give up all objects, owing to realization of their faults), upadha (desire to cheat), bhavah (desire deeply concealed within oneself). (Mohanty 67)

Buddhist thought connects desire with tanha (craving) and differentiates between bhava-tanha, vibhava-tanha, kama-tanha (Olsen 83) while the Natyashastra in expounding its famous rasa theory says, “Almost all the psychological States proceed from erotic passion (kama) and which combined with acts proceeding from desire which is regarded as, passion for virtue (dharma-kama), passion for wealth (artha-kama) and passion for liberation (moksha-kama)” (456; XXIV 94-95).

More specifically, it describes the various “stages of love in case of men as well as of women” (465-67) thus: “First there will be Longing (abhilasha), secondly Anxiety (chinta), thirdly Recollection (anumsrīti), fourthly Enumeration of [the beloved one’s] Merits (gunakirtana), fifthly Distress (udvega), sixthly Lamentation (vilapa), seventhly Insanity (umadā), eighthly Sickness (vyadhi), ninthly Stupor (jadata), and tenthly Death (marana)” (465; XXIV 169-71). The “Kamagita” in the Mahābhārata announces Kama to be both indestructible and eternal 57 and a sloka maintains atmanjanya bhavediccha ichhajanya bhavetkritih/ kritijanya bhavetkriya. 58

Given these existing delineations, one way for me to suggest the texture of desire would be to adopt a method of continuous enumeration, i.e., take any of these as my starting...

57 According to the “Kamagita” Kama has a chameleonic character, is resilient, indestructible and labile:

No creature is able to destroy me without resorting to the proper methods (viz., subjugation of all desires and practice of Yoga etc.) If a man knowing my power strive [sic] to destroy me by muttering prayers etc., I prevail over him by deluding him with the belief that I am the subjective ego within him. If he wish [sic] to destroy me by means of sacrifices with many presents, I deceive him by appearing in his mind as a most virtuous creature amongst the mobile creation, and if he wish [sic] to annihilate me by mastering the Vedas and Vedangas, I overreach him by seeming to his mind to be the soul of virtue amongst the immobile creation. And if the man whose strength lies in truth, desire to overcome me by patience, I appear to him as his mind, and thus he does not perceive my existence, and if the man of austere religious practices, desire to destroy me by means of asceticism, I appear in the guise of asceticism in his mind, and thus he is prevented from knowing me, and the man of learning who with the object of attaining salvation seeks to destroy me, I frolic and laugh in the face of such a man intent on salvation. I am the everlasting one without a compeer, whom no creature can kill or destroy. For this reason ... divert thy desires (Kama) to virtue.... (The Mahābhārata 12: 20)

58 J. N. Mohanty glosses this as “Iccha or desire is caused by the soul (meaning by atma, here ‘knowledge’), desire to do leads to the will to do, the will to do leads to effort, effort leads to action” (67).
point and keep on adding to it as an ultimately open-ended listing of desire. The other would be to come up with a different classification of my own. Quite in keeping with the taxonomic bent of traditional Indian formulations, but perhaps a little askance, I opt for the latter way of proceeding.

In view of my focus on the relations of desire, I employ a "desire as . . ." schematic of clarification rather than a "desire is . . ." paradigm of identification. Consequently, when I choose to see desire as want or as plenitude, and so on, I am not implying that want or plenitude, however they are understood, are in themselves synonymous with desire, or that one conceptualisation must of necessity annul the other in order to be valid. I am well aware that both the terms of my equation (the "constant" desire and the variable other) are polysemous abstractions that are ultimately irreducible to each other. But it is also true that both terms can be discovered in various and sometimes overlapping operation in different thought-systems. What I am suggesting is that in such discoveries their specific meanings emerge, their unstable identities coalesce in particular instances of iterative interaction within the matrices of the different conceptual systems concerned; alternatively, that they come to be, to mean, in and through mutual relation in these thought-complexes; and that the multiplicity of these relations need not nullify each other to satisfy a necessarily singular meaning of what is desire. Indeed, I am further dissuaded from positing any simplistic identity for desire by the varying degrees of non-coincidence that might mark the theoretical/doctrinal and practical relations of desire, even within the "same" overarching structural complex of the ideal-performative.

The examples I use to flesh out my schema are a promiscuous mix of narratives belonging to disparate times, cultures, disciplines, and genres of desire. My only defence for such license, and against scholarly reproof, is that the focus of this exercise is not strictly and/or primarily historicist. It is a more or less synchronic classification of desire as that might be found in sundry spiritual/cultural/cognitive traditions of pre-modern India, and especially as pertains to the
different modes of gendered subjectivities that these theoretically and practically enable or proscribe, either deliberately or otherwise. More specifically, it is a study of the structures of domination that simultaneously underwrite, and get written into, particular inscriptions of desire and the gender identities that mobilise around such inscriptions within different congeries of thought and practice. To what end?

The novel form in India did not develop within a cultural vacuum. My schema is an attempt to arrive at an understanding of desire through a sampling of the different relations of it that were in varying degrees and types of currency part of the web of beliefs and practices of the world within which the novel found its early expressions and which have continued up to the present times, albeit as the other/ed sensibility of a colonial and postcolonial governmentality. Why? Because I am convinced that these have served as a rich cultural resource for the novel form—one that both has been creatively used by the novelists and which can further be of analytical use for the readers/students/critics/theorists of the form. Needless to say, demonstrating the first so as to validate the second, where possible, will be one aspect of the “politics of reading” this thesis seeks to execute; but that will come later.

Turning to the nitty-gritty of schematisation, there are six units to speak of, altogether. Each one provides a different characterisation for desire. While the units are all “Hindu” centric in their substantiations, they are not strictly identical in their patterns of illustration and elaboration. This lack of homology, however, should not detract from the credibility of a schema that is principally geared towards clarifying the continuities and discontinuities (relations) in/across the subject/s of desire as they emerge in its ensemble of narratives. Finally, the arrangement is not chronological; it is idiosyncratic. Here, too, since I am not studying ideas and practices, texts and traditions, to ascertain their exact historical track, since I am only spotlighting them because they were, and continue to be, variously part of the larger cultural consciousness (once again, without trying to
establish the relative prominence they enjoyed and influence they wielded vis-à-vis each other within that complex) in which the novel form first found expression and thereafter developed, I believe my eccentricities in this regard are, if without point, at least harmless.

**Desire as Want**

The slip between the cup and the lip—that’s what desire as want would amount to in common parlance. My attempt is to read its impress in the more specialised idioms of the Bhakti movement.

As a term, “Bhakti” has a composite character. It serves as a convenient label to collectively refer to various strains of religious/spiritual devotionalism that have found expression in different temporal, regional and affective registers of India. According to Vinay Dharwadker,

> [t]he practice, discourse and theory of bhakti are internally multifarious: major divergences appear between saguna and nirguna theologies; among the bhaktas of Shiva, Vishnu and the Devi (the Goddess); between 'sober' and 'intoxicated' styles of devotion; among formations defined by criteria such as male and female, upper-caste and low-caste, dvija-caste and untouchable, and wealth and property; and socially between conservative and progressive communities. (Kabir 292)

But as A. K. Ramanujan observes, “Bhakti … is local, expressed through the mother tongues—yet, like the folklore, it has a pan-Indian network, a repertoire of types and genres that is trans-regional” (“Where Mirrors are Windows” 27). 59

Indeed, its differences notwithstanding, he maintains that:

> [a]ll devotional poetry plays on the tension between saguna and nirguna, the lord as person and the lord as principle. If he were entirely a person, he would not be divine, and if he were entirely a principle, a godhead, one could not make poems about him. The former attitude makes dvaita or dualism possible, and the latter makes for advaita or monism. The Virashaivas rightly call their attitude a combination, dvaitadvaita, a dualistic monism. The Vaishnavas, too, say that the lord is

59 Conversely, Krishna Sharma in the essay “Towards a New Perspective” contends most emphatically that “the Bhakti movement was not a unified or homogeneous movement, as such. The designation, in fact, covers a number of religious movements—each with its own distinctive features and ethos. Some of them were even antithetical to one another, notwithstanding their common denominator bhakti” (291-92). As she writes, “[t]hese different elements can be sifted and judged separately only if the dichotomy presented by the Nirguna and Saguna bhaktas is faced squarely. The monolithic treatment of the Bhakti movement, and the historical perspective that sustains it, have been questioned in this work to provide a raison d’être for the polarization of the two groups” (315). Having said that, she also concedes that, “The correlation between the two is possible—but not essential” (301).
characterised by both *paratatva*, “otherness,” and *saulabhya*, “ease of access”; he is both here and beyond, both tangible as a person and intangible as a principle—such is the nature of the ground of all being. It is not either/or, but both/and; ... *bhakti* ... would be impossible without the presence of both attitudes. (The Myths of Bhakti 295)

Without necessarily insisting with Ramanujan on the “pan-Indian network” of Bhakti poetics, my elaboration of desire as want does attend to the interplay between *dvaita* and *advaita*, *paratatva* and *saulabhya* that he identifies as common in some form or the other to the phenomenon as a whole.\(^60\)

The way I see it, *bhakti* (glossed as loving devotion) is occasioned by a gnawing experience of want within the self, by the *anubhava* of a self-deficiency and a concomitant awareness of an all-powerful, all-pervasive Presence. As such, it is urged by an intense longing for fulfilment, through union, *samadhi*, right cognition. This passionate yearning is what I call Bhakti desire.\(^61\) The object of the devotee’s desire is variously the *nirguna* Principle/Brahman or the *saguna* God/Ishvara. So, Bhakti desire actually exists on the basis of a necessary dualism: the difference between the Principle/God that is all-in-all and the *bhakta* who is a lovelorn and abject being. But this difference, this dualism, need neither be permanent nor absolute. In the *nirguni* non-dual view, the devotee-self/atman is essentially and really the same, only embodiedly, illusorily (Maya) and in passing different from the God-self, Brahman, Parmatman.\(^62\) As Basavanna says “Aware, one is the Lord’s/unaware, a mere human (Speaking of Siva 90; song no. 860) for “The man in the world’s Illusion/does not know the Lord/nor the Lord him”

\(^60\) The proposed summary is perforce limited and interested. It is based upon reductive generalisations. As such it does not lay claim to having covered every aspect of the heterogeneous complex that constitutes Bhakti.

\(^61\) It might be meet to mention here that this is my postulation. Bhakti theologies prefer the word *prema* (love) to desire which it identifies as selfishly and fleshly motivated. But the understanding of desire posited here encompasses all manner of longings, hungers, stirrings and so, it can be argued, is not a misapplication.

\(^62\) Perhaps the following anecdote, attributed to Sri Ramakrishna will help clarify the specific understanding and function of dualism in Bhakti thought. Sri Ramakrishna says:

> Once Rama asked Hanuman, “How do you look on me?” and Hanuman replied: “O Rama, as long as I have the feeling of ‘I,’ I see that Thou art the whole and I am a part; Thou art the Master and I am Thy servant. But when, O Rama, I have the knowledge of Truth, then I realize that Thou art I, and I am thou.” (The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna 105)
(Speaking of Siva 97; Dasimayya song no. 23). With recognition, however, comes intimate consciousness of “the miracle of your breath/in my body” (Speaking of Siva 106; Dasimayya song no. 120). And where the dualism is more or less of a given, then its burdens need not remain unrelieved. In the variously qualified non-dualist or dualist view, the devotee is an amsha of Ishvara or Ishvara is the efficient while not the material cause of the jiva yet infinitely Merciful to it. Thus, Tukaram, in one of his abhangas both affirms the difference between the bhakta and Bhagavan and deems that difference to be key in rendering the experience of bhakti the sweeter:

What does the lotus know of its own fragrance?
It is the bumble bee that enjoys it.
The mother cow grazes on pasture,
But the milk is relished by her calf.
The pearl lies hidden in the heart of the oyster;
'Tis others, not the oyster, who get joy from it.
Likewise, my Lord, Thou cost not know the joy of Thy Name;
We are the ones who experience that bliss. (Tukaram Wachanamrit 289)

In another song, he asserts both how submergence in the Deity is the panacea for the soul’s intense longing and how this submergence comes about through devotion, but also through divine grace:

How can there be any room left for other desires,
When my entire being is engrossed in Thee alone?
Nothing is now a barrier between Thee and me,
For the seed of devotion has borne its fruit.
Gone from my heart is the anguish of separation;
Why need I now bother to contemplate on Thee?
By the grace of Thy feet, O Lord, says Tuka,
The illusion of this world has been destroyed. (Shri Tukaram Babachi Abhang-Gatha, no. 1276)

Differences notwithstanding, then, the modal of bhakti and prapatti, remain critical in both nirguna and saguna expressions for achieving the desired release, liberation, bliss. Such an understanding also explains the recurrent tropes of viraha, prema and samadhi in Bhakti poetry as well as the numerous

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63 The whole vacana padam reads as follows: “I’m the one who has the body,/you’re the one who has holds the breath./You know the secret of my body,/I know the secret of your breath./That’s why your body/is in mine./You know/and I know, Ramanatha,/the miracle/of your breath/in my body.”
hagiographic accounts of the final merger of various bhaktas with their ishta devatas.\textsuperscript{64}

At this point, in case one is wont to wonder if bhakti desire is not simply the Psychoanalytic understanding of desire as lack mentioned earlier, with a metaphysical spin, my answer would be, not quite. Despite interesting overlaps, the differences between the two are too significant to be overlooked. It is true that in both discursive assemblages desire can be seen as born from an originary splitting.\textsuperscript{65} However in Freud- and Lacan-inspired Psychoanalytic theories the precedent undifferentiated state is relegated to a fantastic prehistory of the fragmented self (which only is granted historical validity). Furthermore, the desire of this partial self for self-sufficiency, for self-identity with an Imaginary self, is considered hopelessly deluded, based as it is on a mis-recognition, a \textit{meconnaissance} that is both inevitable and irremediable. Hence Psychoanalytic desire is both born of a lack and must ever remain lacking for its remedy spells death, madness and/or unconsciousness for the ego/self. Contra this, Bhakti desire, though it too is subsequent upon an experience of want in the self, is called forth and thereafter moved by a moment of recognition, i.e., \textit{pratyabhijnana} (right cognition of the self) or anagnorisis. Cutting through the misperceptions of Maya (Primal Illusion), the devotee-self re-cognises Reality: that the world of duality is transient or unreal; that his/her self is a part or facet or product of the Supreme Self (conceptualised in its nirguna/saguna aspect).\textsuperscript{66} Thus the devotee’s passionate desire for self-forgetful submersion in his/her God-self is actually supremely self-fulfilling. And unlike in Psychoanalysis, the achievement of the object of one’s desire is neither impossible nor loaded with negative

\textsuperscript{64} For instance, saints such as Mira, Antal, Mahadeviyakka.

\textsuperscript{65} This is, of course, only true of non-dual or qualified non-dual forms of bhakti

\textsuperscript{66} The ardour is that of the part for the whole, of the embodied soul, \textit{jiva}, for the Supreme Soul, \textit{atman} (both being essentially the same), and not of One for the Other (both being substantially different).
consequences. Submergence in the Parmatman, *samadhi*, in fact, far from a collapse into death/unconsciousness/madness is an ecstatic emergence into or an enstastic immersion in Supreme Consciousness. Then again, whereas in Freudian and Lacanian formulations libido/desire is exclusively masculine (finds expression only in the Symbolic order), Bhakti desire especially in the *madhurya bhava* is preeminently feminine. To quote A. K. Ramanujan:

> An especially arresting aspect of the bhakti milieu ... is the extent to which bhakti itself appears as “feminine” in nature, by contrast to the Vedic sacrifice, which may be considered “masculine” in ethos, personnel and language. The chief mood of bhakti is the erotic (sringara), seen almost entirely from an Indian woman’s point of view, whether in its phase of separation or of union .... both male and female address love poems to Krishna and Shiva and adopt such feminine personae as wife (kanta), illicit lover (parakiya), trysting woman (abhisarika), even Radha herself.... (“On Women Saints” 270)

But given the fact that this desire is born of an initial and/or actually illusory dualism that either disappears with right recognition or is dissolved in merger; given that the feminine is associated with want and dependency while the Supreme Consciousness is deemed masculine; and given that the final aim of the bhakta is to realise oneness with this consciousness or to lose himself/herself in it, there would be no exaggeration in saying that in its own way Bhakti is geared towards recognising the lie and/or lack that is femininity and so neutralising it through *samadhi*.

Up ahead, I offer, a speculative summary of how the phenomenon of Bhakti desire stands caught up in the web of gender relations.

If they see breasts and long hair coming

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67 Even in worldly terms. Reading a first draft Mr. Arjun Mahey had wondered if in worldly terms *samadhi* or realisation did not come with negative consequences. Ramaswamy, for one, names women *bhaktas* who have benefited as well as been empowered materially through their spirituality (20).

68 Talking of the right attitude of devotion, the Bhaktisutras of Narada say, “Having kept clear of the three modified forms of secondary devotion, one should cultivate love and, love alone, which has its principle in those stages of devotion, which are known as constant service and *constant wifely conduct*” (29; sutra 66, emphasis mine). Alternatively, articulating the Bengal Vaishnava view, Krishnadas says, “In truth every finite being is essentially an emanation or phase of Radha, to wit, a *manjari* or a milkmaid of Eternal Vrindavana in the prime of perennial youth” (*Krishna of Vrindavana* 446 as ctd. in Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute* 65).
they call it woman,
if beard and whiskers
they call it man:
but, look, the self that hovers
in between
is neither man
nor woman
O Rāmanātha. (Dasimayya as qtd. in Ramanujan, “Where Mirrors Are Windows” 28)

On the one hand there is this recognition, nay assertion even, of the superficiality, the utter inconsequentiality of the markers of gender identity/difference in Bhakti thought. More stress is laid upon the sameness rather than the difference between men and women: both are considered embodied souls; both are also in the same state of separation from the Lord, the Supreme Soul. Thus the sameness between them is seen as eternal while the difference (merely of the mortal body) is deemed ephemeral, in the ultimate analysis. But on the other hand, there is also copious evidence of a counter spirit at work in Bhakti theologies. Gender differences here are understood in dichotomous terms. Masculinity and femininity are seen as polarised conditions of power and powerlessness, fulness and lack. The interesting point is that this antithesis finds its fullest expression not so much in the difference between men and women per se but in the difference between the Lord and the devotee. Thus, the deity’s power is masculine while the devotee’s lack is feminine. This is what allows Meera to humble Jiv Goswami (who had refused to meet her because she was a woman) by informing him “that as far as she knows there is only one male in Vrindavan and that is Krishna” (Nancy M. Martin, “Mirabai” 10). It is also what inspires Mahadeviyakka, for instance, when she claims: ... I saw His glory,/and seeing, I quell today/the famine in my eyes./I saw the haughty Master/for whom men, all men,/are but women, wives ...” (Speaking of Siva 120; song no 68).69 But most importantly, as mentioned before, such an orientation also implicitly feminises desire itself.

Not surprisingly, and reconfirming the predilection to confuse femininity with female, women were seen to enjoy a “natural advantage” over their male

69 In fact, a “guiding feature of Virasaivism is the belief Sharana Sati-Linga Pati meaning the Sharana or spiritual aspirant whether male or female is always the virtuous wife and Siva the eternal bridegroom” (Ramaswamy 163).
counterparts in certain Bhakti modes vis-à-vis their relation to the Lord. This explains why male bhaktas often assume a feminine persona in their relation to God while female bhaktas engage only infrequently in gender-switching impersonations, since “they are already, quite naturally, wives or slaves of the Lord” (Carmen, Introduction 266). As Ramanujan explains, “It is as if, being already female, she has no need to change anything to turn towards God…. she need shed nothing, for she has nothing to shed: neither physical prowess, nor social power, nor punditry, nor even social pride” (“On Women Saints” 277). Ironically, thus, the female bhakta is privileged by virtue of her completely abased status as a woman in patriarchal social milieus. My purpose here is neither to scoff at the potency of the woman bhakta’s spiritual experience, nor indeed to belittle the magnitude of her disregard for social conventions in her spiritual quest. Through her bhakti, quite possibly, she is as one who has crossed the Rubicon of worldly concerns and dualisms. But for those still trammeled by this-worldly cares, it must be admitted, that the Bhakti valorisation of extreme feminine self-abnegation and helplessness, more often than not, only reinforces existing misogynistic social values. In fact, whatever access to agency/power that Bhakti thought affords women can only, at best, be deemed paradoxical: a woman gains only through accepting her deficient identity as feminine; through self-abasement she achieves Self-realisation. In the meantime, the almost axiomatic identification of lack with femininity in Bhakti thought, especially in Vaishnava and Shaiva bhakti, only props up popular prejudice.

Ambivalence, often slipping into distaste or distrust, vis-à-vis the position and role of women and/or femininity is also not hard to come by in Bhakti theologies.

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Kumkum Sangari reaches similar conclusions but with a different emphasis when she writes that:

Mira’s bhakti is contradictory: it protests and assists in its appropriations, has both a radicalising potential and compensatory character…. Her bhakti is internally poised to lose the ground it sets to gain. For us Mira represents a struggle, not a victory. (“Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of Bhakti” 1551)

My own reading would stress that it is “for us” (who have standards, goals and worldviews other than hers) that Mira represents a struggle. By her own yardstick, who is to say she was not victorious?
For instance, even the fiercely nirguni Kabir is not averse to affixing a gender-sex tag on Maya. If in “Maya” Illusion is female incarnate,\(^1\) then in “Deadly Business” Maya, if not female, is definitely feminine.\(^2\) Needless to say, Maya is

\(^1\) Maya
We know
what Maya is—
a great robber and thief,
a con-woman
in cahoots with con-men....

In Keshav’s house
she masquerades as Kamala,
in Shiva’s mansion
she’s Bhavani....

She has planted herself
in the ascetic’s hut
as an ascetic woman,
in the king’s palace
she sits on the throne
as a queen....

She has moved in
with the common devotee
and become a devotee herself,
she lives with the Muslim man
as his Muslim woman.

Kabir says, listen,
O holy men—
this is the whole
ineffable tale. (Dharwadkar, Kabir 146-47)

\(^2\) Deadly Business
I try to give up Maya
but I can’t give her up.
Again and again
she wraps herself
around me.

Honour is Maya,
pride is Maya.
Where there’s no Maya
there’s knowledge
of the ultimate reality....

Prayer beads are Maya,
austerities are Maya
yoga, too, is Maya.
Maya ties up
everybody.....
destructive as well as obstructive so that only “Where there’s no Maya/there’s knowledge/of the ultimate reality” (“Deadly Business”). Then again, the enthusiastic worship of the feminine principle “in Srivaishanavism, [where] Lakshmi is considered the divine mediatrix, without whom access to Narayana is not possible ... [or] in the Gaudiya tradition [where] Radha is seen as the Supreme Goddess, for it is said that she controls Krishna with her love” (Rosen, Introduction 2) can be seen as subtly participating in, and sacralising, patriarchal prejudices. The female/feminine is celebrated here as a means to the end—granted it’s an important, even vital means, but a means nonetheless. Thus even certain forms of the worship of the Goddess confirm in unobtrusive ways the

Maya is mother, Maya is father, father and mother are Maya. And, in the final count Maya is wife and child.

Maya carries on her deadly business by killing. Kabir says, in this sport, Rama is my sole support. (Dharwadkar, Kabir 152-53)

The argument that Maya is grammatically feminine goes only so far. For one, when Kabir is questioning so many pieties, it is unlikely grammar would be sacrosanct. For another, in his poems Maya can be “wife and child” and everything else under the sun but not the husband. The normative subject of Kabir’s poem is very clearly an adult male.

Interestingly Sri Ramakrishna is similarly convinced about the femininity of Maya. He even divides her into vidyamaya and avidyamaya, the benign and malignant aspect of Kali that comprehends all relative phenomena. But where he differs most crucially is in his passionate insistence that this saguna Shakti is the same as the nirguna, niranjan Brahman: “Brahman and Shakti are identical, like fire and its power to burn. When we talk of fire we automatically mean also its power to burn. Again, the fire’s power to burn implies the fire itself. If you accept the one you must accept the other” (The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna 108).

In Bengal Vaishnava theology the Supreme Being (Krishna) has several shaktis. Of these the three most important are svarupa shakti, jiva shakti and maya shakti. The svarupa shakti is further divided into samdhini (sat), samvit (cit), and lhadini (ananda inclusive of sat and cit). Radha is supposed to be Krishna’s lhadini shakti. “In Bengal Vaishnava philosophy, jivas (souls, spiritual essences) are understood to be manifestations of God’s lhadini shakti, his most essential self, which is nothing but pure bliss and epitomized by Radha. Jivas, however, are inhibited from expressing their true nature due to the influence of maya, which often makes jivas averse to God. Salvation is simply the process whereby man recognizes his true nature and gives it vent in the devotion to Krishna ...” (Kinsley, The Sword and the Flute 70, 64). As is clear, though Radha is divine, she is only a divine amsha of the Supreme Being. If all jivas are Radha, and Radha is female while Krishna male, what is implicit is the understanding of the female/feminine as part of the male/masculine. Similarly in Srivaishnavism, Lakshmi is supposed to always reside in the heart of Vishnu.
instrumental and/or ancillary position of the feminine/female vis-à-vis the masculine/male.\textsuperscript{75}

On the whole, therefore, I believe that the gender assumptions that found Bhakti logic are not, at least theoretically speaking, fair to women or indeed the feminine principle. The lines along which I see it proceeding in aniconic and non-dual traditions are, roughly put, as follows: desire is born of dualism\textarrowright desire is born/e of/by a deficiency and dependency\textarrowright feminine is both deficient and dependent\textarrowright desire is feminine\textarrowright devotee is feminine\textarrowright self-sufficiency, the other of desire or what is desired, is masculine\textarrowright deity is masculine\textarrowright dualism is an illusion\textarrowright deity and devotee are one\textarrowright desire is an illusion\textarrowright feminine is an illusion\textarrowright oneness is real\textarrowright and One (the Principle) is masculine.\textsuperscript{76} Within qualified dualist or dualist frames, the above pattern more or less holds up to the point where the deity’s masculinity is affirmed. Thereafter, it would read something like the following: Deity is Merciful\textarrowright devotee is abject\textarrowright dualism is real and an affliction\textarrowright feminine is real and dependent\textarrowright desire is devotion of the dependent for the Deity\textarrowright the object of bhakti is to lose oneself in the divine\textarrowright the object of bhakti is for the feminine to stand subsumed by the Masculine.

\textsuperscript{75} The protestations that theologically the male and the female, end and means, are the same do nothing to obviate the discriminations and subordinations that are written into such delineations of the masculine and the feminine. And before this gets dismissed as some “motivated feminist over reading” it might be meet to remember that the female bhaktas themselves were not too convinced with the argument that the means and the ends are the same. If they had been so, it is hardly likely that they would have refused to settle for loving devotion to their scripturally enjoined earthly Lord (husband), and means to the immortal, and yearn instead for the real McCoy. In fact, with uncompromising tenacity, the bhakta resolves to “go cuckold my husband with Hara, my Lord/...I will make Him/my good husband” (Speaking of Siva 141; song no. 328 Mahadeviyakka). As for that arrant imposter himself, there is a rather novel use. Mahavediyakka says, “Take these husbands who die/ decay, and feed them/ to your kitchen fires!” (Speaking of Siva 134; song no. 283).

\textsuperscript{76} As A. K. Ramanujan says, “androgyn, like ... Ardhanarishvara, the form of Shiva who is half-woman is a male phenomenon” (“Men, Women and Saints” 291). When I say Oneness is masculine, what I mean is that this non-gender entity is conceived in terms that take the male experience as normative, thereby surreptitiously gendering it, and gendering it masculine.
If, rendered thus, Bhakti thought is none too radical in its gender-role delineations, what about the practice of Bhakti? Taking a broad view of things, Ramanujan writes,

After the sixth century, a new kind of person comes upon the historical scenes in India, first in Tamilnadu and later in other parts of the country. Their poems are their best introduction. There is no single word, like the English word ‘saint,’ in Indian languages for this kind of person, but one can find different words depending on the religious group: the Kannada Virasaivas call them sarana, the Kannada Vaisnavas dasa, the Tamil Saivites nayanmar, the Tamil Vaisnavas alvar. In northern traditions, such religious persons are called sants.... the Hindu saints do not appear alone, they seem to appear in droves, in interacting groups of three and four in these early times. They often form a composite saint, each taking on a different face of the religious experience.... The Virasaiva or the Vaisnava movement...was not made by any one of the saints, but by this composite. The Virasaiva saints, for instance, overlap in time, like strands in a rope: they are elder and younger contemporaries to each other—they are anna or elder brother, akka or elder sister, to each other. They are often thought of as a family, as a society.... The saint is not born into this family, but reborn into it. The second birth often cancels the characteristics of the first, with its caste, name, inheritance, household, and often gender.... They, with their followers, form a new society, a second society within the larger one. Thus together, they constitute a family, a cult, a culture, a society, a counter to the ones of ordinary men and women: they form in Victor Turner’s terms a counter-structure at all levels, a community seeking communitas. ("Men, Women, and Saints" 279-83)

Both the Bhakti saint and the Bhakti community produce anomalies and paradoxes at the level of social conventions which if not revolutionary are at least interruptive of orthodox gender socialisation. For one, as the worship and sampradaya, ideologically, of “have-nots,” the Bhakti ethic, aesthetic, metaphysics as well as collective is not only protestant and democratic, but also, through a standpoint lens, the more inclusive.

77 Vijaya Ramaswamy points out how the concept of community is implied in the etymology of the word bhakti. To quote her, “The term bhakti comes from the root b\bhaj, which has a wide range of meanings. The root bhaj can mean to serve, thus underpinning the concept of loyalty. It can also mean ‘to share’ or to participate equally, implying the concept of community” (109). Then again, glossing Jayant Lele’s work in Marathi she shows how the concept of bhakti as sharing draws inspiration from the Bhagavata movement. “In pre-historic society, necessities were produced in common and shared equally. People themselves were ‘Bhagavata’ meaning the custodians of all wealth and property. Bhakti derived from ‘Bhagavata’ therefore meant mutual sharing and participation within the community. It is only in the course of historical evolution that this ‘bhagavat’ becomes externalised in the form of bhagavan and a bhakta becomes a devotee. Bhagavata as a community cutting across caste/class/gender boundaries is one of the strongest features of the movement of the Azhvars and the Nayanars. It is this notion of ‘community’ contained in the concept of bhakti that has made it such a powerful vehicle of social protest and reform” (112-113). Elsewhere, Dharwadker also notes the importance of community in the Bhakti framework (Kabir 61-62).

78 For handy clarification, refer to Nupur Chaudhuri and Rajat Kanta Ray’s essay, “The Fifth Aim of Life” (Evam 3: 226-44)
and ascesis had been deemed off-limits for women in orthodox Hindu writ. Hindu monastic orders and maths established by Shankara for instance, were and continue to be piously all-male affairs. Bhakti communes flouted these patriarchal homospiritual pieties by making room for the dedicated female spiritual aspirant within the Hindu fold. Although bearing the stigmata of social deviance, as Ramaswamy asserts, the female bhakta was both plethorically expressive and devotionally bona fide as never before. One major cause for this, of course, was the tendency in certain forms of Bhakti to read the votary as feminine and the Deity as masculine. That paradigmatic ordering in fact has another interesting implication for gender relations. Because in all the traffic between the (feminine) devotee and the (masculine) Divine, what is also produced is a curious ambivalence about the human masculine. As against its destitution vis-à-vis the Godhead, the feminine and through it, the female bhakta, actually gains a density, a granularity in social concourse where the human masculine and through it the male bhakta stands emptied of content, as a masquerade, as a faux identity. Among other things, this made possible the kind of exchange between Mirabai and Jiv Goswami cited earlier, carrying out a levelling, even reversing, of the usual hierarchy that fixes gender interactions, caste, class, age and other social markers of command being equal. It also accounts for how the woman bhakta could, and did, explore and express her loving devotion more directly from her subjectivity while the male bhakta often appears constrained to search for an appropriate feminine persona to articulate his bhakti.

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79 I am not dealing here with the politics and polemics of Bhakti as it pitched itself against Buddhist and Jain thought. Katherine K. Young, for one, thinks this context may have played some part in the greater accommodation women found within Srivaishnava Tamil Bhakti (“Theology Does Help Women’s Liberation” 261).

80 I am grateful to Prof. Udaya Kumar for calling my attention to this aspect of Bhakti thought.

81 Subjectivity not as an essence, mind you. For a helpful account of the structural-ideological complex that underwrote the subjectivity of feminine devotionalism, refer to Daud Ali’s essay on the genealogy of female subjectivity as it shifts from nayika to bhakta in early medieval India.
Practically disturbing Bhakti definitely was, in this wise. However, for all the recognition of female spirituality, for all the inclusion of women in the spiritual sampradaya, as Ramaswamy notes:

It is seldom that women saints have established an order, boasted of a large following or left behind strong spiritual traditions.... Virasaivism in theory admits women into the Jangama order thus recognizing the possibility of the foundation of monastic establishments by women. However, this has rarely operated in practice, a few unique exceptions merely proving the convention that monastic orders founded by women were untenable. (25)

Elsewhere, Uma Chakravarti maintains that,

A reading of the lives and the poetry of the south Indian bhaktins reveals a difference between the experience of bhakti for the bhakta and the bhaktin in the arena of marriage. An important dimension of the bhakti movement ... was the breakdown of the householder and renouncer divide.... In practice, however, the collapsing of this boundary operated only in the case of men. For women the dichotomy persisted, and the tension between marriage and devotion to a personal god was never successfully resolved... (Everyday Lives, Everyday Histories 283)

Similarly, different critics have commented on how, from the evidence of their purported legacies, at least, social reform and protest was more the preoccupation of male bhaktas than their female counterparts. For the latter, it was the personal quest that seemed to take precedence over issues of social justice, amelioration and equity.82 Then again, while the human masculine underwent a type of effacement within the specific gender dynamics operationalised in Bhakti desire, the logic of that same dynamic meant only a human male could ever lay claim to being God incarnate. Whereas an Akka Mahadevi could only say, “A woman though in name/I am, if you consider well,/the male principle” (Ramaswamy 23), Chaitanya Mahaprabhu as the embodiment of Radha and Krishna was “the divine golden dancer, a God in whose eternal dance the highest aspects of divine love, culminating in raganuga-bhakti-sadhana and the bliss of a faithful manjari are revealed” (Rosen, “Raganuga Bhakti” 130).83

82 Of course, this was radical insofar as the personal and spiritual were precisely what were denied to women in orthodox prescription. Nonetheless, their poetry steeped in phallogocentric symbology and assumptions did little to unsettle the terms of patriarchal discourse.

83 Karin Kapadia makes a similar point in discussing the gender dynamics underwriting divine possession rituals amongst the middle-ranking castes in Tamil Nadu. To quote her, when men are ritually empowered through possession, being filled and energized with divine power, they are, unlike women, able to direct these divine “female” powers as well. This is because, unlike women, men, when they are “female,” can represent and embody Deity in a whole and complete manner, for they encompass both Power/Energy and Wisdom.
In the final analysis, therefore, it would perhaps be unfair to judge Bhakti in its heterogeneous expressions of desire as either exclusively radical or reactionary. Bhakti both questioned/reordered/upset and consolidated certain discriminatory gender norms. And if some forms of Bhakti were doctrinally orthodox and practically reactionary (from a gender perspective), then there were also enough manifestations of it that were practically radical and doctrinally inclusive. Thus on the one hand I find myself agreeing with Dasimayya, that to the “utterly at one with Shiva” bhakti affords a radically transformed consciousness whereby “his front yard/is the true Benaras” (Speaking of Siva 105), but on the other, I also wholeheartedly concur with Basavanna when he likens Bhakti to a two-edged sword that “cuts when it goes/ and it cuts again/ when it comes” (Speaking of Siva 79).

Desire as Plenitude

In such a rendering instead of the need/imperative to be desire is understood as the power to become.

Popular wisdom in India is no stranger to the idea that creation is “Ishvar ki lila” or God’s manifest love playfulness. In fact, the thought finds considerable

Furthermore, she writes,

This ideology of male completeness is given subtle but powerful iconic in the remarkable androgynous image of Shiva Ardhanari.... though androgynous, the identity of the divine image is male. This is suggested by the slight predominance usually given to the male half of the sculptured image and it is unambiguously stated in the name of the icon: Shiva Ardhanari, that is, “Shiva as Half-Woman.” It is rarely described as “Parvati as Half-Man.” (“Pierced by Love 198).

84 Most famous of these is Krishna’s love-drenched Rasalila with Radha and the gopis in the idyllic setting of Vrindavan or Gokul that is the Goloka (Krishna’s heavenly abode) on earth. David Kinsley glosses this phenomenon thus:

All creations (or expressions) arising from his svarupa-shakti are essentially the same as God, since they are entirely within his essential selfhood; they are intrinsically related to the Godhead, eternally existing within. And what are the creations, or expressions, of the Godhead’s svarupa-shakti? They are the people of Vrindavana, especially the gopis, and particularly Radha. The theological interpretation of the origin of Radha and the gopis is important, for it declares that not just Krishna alone, but also Krishna surrounded by the population and paraphernalia of Vrindavana, is the essential form of the Godhead. The whole
currency in its non-dualistic philosophico-spiritual traditions. The Upanishads, as the bedrock that firms the philosophy of Advaita among others, appear to me, therefore, an apposite corpus of texts to look at for exemplary elaboration. \(^{85}\)

As I see it, the idea of desire as plenitude circulates in the Upanishads as an amalgam of three basic convictions: the primacy, autonomy and authenticity of the One (multiplicity is secondary and illusory/ephemeral), desire as a phenomenon of primal fission rather than fusion, and plenitude as the consciousness of no Other and therefore the source for all real desires/actions. Upanishadic texts, in one form or the other thus, can be seen repeatedly proclaiming that, “In the beginning this world was only brahman, only one” (Olivelle 16; BU 1.4.11). \(^{86}\) And what is this Brahman? Brahman is the one, true, ultimate, imperishable reality/atman:

This person, creating every desire,
who lies awake within those who sleep;
That alone is the Pure! That is brahman!
That alone is called the Immortal!
On it all the worlds rest;
Beyond it no one can ever pass.
(Olivelle 243; *Kaiha Upanishad* 5.8; and passim)

As for the nature of primal desire experienced by Brahman—Brahmanic desire is described not as a compulsion or a necessity that requires fulfillment from another but as a sudden, conative idea/resolve that is very much within the capacity of, indeed is an aspect/opportunity of greater Self realisation:

Vrindavana episode, then, is to be understood to take place within the Godhead constantly. In its essential form the Godhead is an eternal, playful, delightful dalliance in paradiisiacal Vrindavana. (*The Sword and the Flute* 70)

\(^{85}\) Quoting and echoing, T. M. P. Mahadevan, Arvind Sharma writes, “the Upanisads are the basic springs not merely of Hindu but Indian philosophy, ‘not only for the orthodox system but also for the so called heterodox systems of Indian thought’—those of Buddhism and Jainism. The later schools, of Madhvacarya, Ramanuja and Sankara—the Dvaita, Visistadvaita and Advaita schools—also claim to derive their authority from the Upanisads” (*Classical Hindu Thought* 197).

\(^{86}\) Some other instances are “In the beginning this world was just a single body (atman) shaped like a man” (Olivelle 13; BU 1.4.1). In the beginning this world was only the self (atman), only one” (Olivelle 17; BU 1.4.17). “... in the beginning this world was simply what is existent—one only, without a second” (Olivelle 149; CU 6.2.2-3). In the beginning the world was the self (atman), one alone, and there was no other being at all that blinked an eye” (Olivelle 195; AU 1.1).
... in the beginning this world was simply what is existent—one only, without a second. And it thought to itself: "Let me become many. Let me propagate myself." (Olivelle 149; CU 6.2.2-3)

or

He had this desire: "Let me multiply myself. Let me produce offspring." So he heated himself up. When he had heated himself up, he emitted this whole world, everything that is here. After emitting it, he entered that very world. And after entering it, he became in turn Sat and Tjar, the distinct and the indistinct, the resting and the never resting, the perceived and the non-perceived, the real (satya) and the unreal (anritia). (Olivelle 187; TU 2.6)

or

In the beginning the world was the self (atman), one alone, and there was no other being at all that blinked an eye. He thought to himself: "Let me create the worlds." So he created these worlds. (Olivelle 195; AU 1.1)

The Other here is contained within the self. It is recognised in these texts only as a part of the self, one that the self creates by splitting itself for its own pleasure:

In the beginning this world was just a single body (atman) shaped like a man. He looked around and saw nothing but himself. The first thing he said was "Here I am!" and from that the name "I" came into being.... He found no pleasure at all; so one finds no pleasure when one is alone. He wanted to have a companion. Now he was as large as a man and a woman in close embrace. So he split (pat) his body into two, giving rise to husband (pati) and wife (patni). Surely this is why Yajnavalkya used to say: "The two of us are like two halves of a block." The space here, therefore, is completely filled by the woman.

He copulated with her, and from their union human beings were born.... (Olivelle 13-14; BU 1.4.1-3)

Moreover, as mentioned before, Brahman and plenitude are inseparable so that the realisation of one automatically means the realisation of the other. Not surprisingly, primal desire in this paradigm finds reiterative understanding as an impulsive expression of plenitude/Brahman:

Now, a man out-talks only when he out-talks with truth.... Now, a man must first perceive before he speaks the truth.... A man must first think before he perceives.... A man must first have faith before he thinks.... A man must first produce before he has faith.... A man must first act before he produces.... A man must attain well-being before he acts.... Now, well-being is nothing but plenitude. There is no prosperity in scarcity. Prosperity is indeed plenitude.... Where a man sees, hears, or discerns no other thing—that is plenitude. Where one sees, hears, or discerns some other thing—that is scarcity. Now, plenitude is the immortal, while scarcity constitutes what is mortal.

Sir, on what is plenitude based?
On one's own greatness. Or, maybe, it is not based on greatness. Cattle and horses, elephants and gold, slaves and wives—these are what people here call greatness. But I don’t consider them that way; no, I don’t, for they are all based on each other.

87 The original Sanskrit term, which Olivelle translates as plenitude, is bhuma. Radhakrishnan glosses this as infinite: "grand, superlative, abundant, mahat niratisayam bahviti. It is the highest that can be reached, the infinite" (Radhakrishnan 486). While "infinite" obviously applies, I believe, Olivelle's translation also does a handy job of suggesting the different senses that the Sanskrit usage implies. Besides, it fits better the design/s of my overall schematic.
Plenitude, indeed, is below; plenitude is above; plenitude is in the west, plenitude is
in the east; plenitude is in the south; and plenitude is in the north. Indeed plenitude
extends over this whole world.

Now, the substitution of the word "I"—"I am indeed, below; I am above ... I extend
over this whole world."

Next the substitution of self—"The self, indeed, is below; the self is above ... Indeed, the self extends over this whole world?"

A man who sees it this way, thinks about it this way, and perceives it this way; a man
who finds pleasure in the self, who dallies with the self, who mates with the self, and
who attains bliss in the self—he becomes completely his own master; he obtains
complete freedom of movement in the worlds. Those who perceive it otherwise,
however, are ruled by others and obtain perishable worlds; they have no freedom of
movement in any of the worlds.

When indeed a man sees it this way, thinks about it this way, and perceives it this
way—lifebreath springs from his self; hope springs from his self.... Indeed, this
whole world springs from his self.

(Olivelle 164-66; CU 7.16-26.1)

In his essay “Some Thoughts on ‘Non-Western’ Classics” A. K. Ramanujan
makes the epigrammatic remark that “too far east is west” (115).88 Just as an aside
and without being facetious, the proximate conclusions on the self-sufficiency of
desire in postmodernist writings, very broadly etched earlier, and Upanishadic
conceptions, almost bears him out. Contra Bhakti and Psychoanalysis, what is
interesting here is how these two sets and styles of thought arrive at comparable
postulations from fundamentally different, even antithetical assumptions and
overall orientations. For instance, in the Upanishadic worldview multiplicity is
ultimately illusory and transient; perception of difference is ignorance; and only
Brahman, the original One, is real. In stark contrast postal thought is impelled by
its avowal of radical and irreducible difference. It not only abjures identity as a
mirage; it also characterises any insistence upon it as unequivocally repressive.

Similarly, for Deleuze and Guattari all desire is real:

If desire produces, its product is real. If desire is productive, it can be productive
only in the real world and can produce only reality. Desire is the set of passive
syntheses that engineer partial objects, flows and bodies and that function as units of
production. The real is the end product, the result of the passive syntheses of desire
as the autoproduction of the unconscious. [Moreover ] ... social production is purely
and simply desiring-production itself under determinate conditions. We maintain that
the social field is immediately invested by desire, that it is the historically
determined product of desire, and that libido has no need of any mediation or
sublimation, any psychic operation, any transformation, in order to invade and invest

88 The flip side to this statement could be Deleuze and Guattari's firmly tongue-in-cheek assertion
that "west was the shortest route east" (A Thousand Plateaus 154).
the productive forces and the relations of production. There is only desire and the social, and nothing else. (Anti-Oedipus 26-29)

As opposed to this there is a clear-cut hierarchy of desires operating in the Upanishads:

Now here in this fort of brahman there is a small lotus, a dwelling-place, and within it, a small space. In that space there is something—and that’s what you should try to discover…. That does not age, as this body grows old; That is not killed, when this body is slain—That is the real fort of brahman, in it are contained all desires. That is the self free from evils—free from old age and death, free from sorrow, free from hunger and thirst; the self whose desires and intentions become real…. So, those here in this world who depart without having discovered the self and these real desires do not obtain complete freedom of movement in any of the worlds, whereas those here in this world who depart after discovering the self and these real desires obtain complete freedom of movement in all the worlds.

Now, these real desires are masked by the unreal. Although they are real, they have the unreal for a mask…. (Olivelle 167-68; CU 8.1-3.1)

In fact, given the importance accorded to desire in determining the course of one’s life, the Upanishads hold that it is imperative we distinguish real desire from ignorant ones. Real desire leads to self-realisation/Brahman, while unreal ones lead to a continuous enmeshment in the web of karma and samsara. Real desire emerges from, and leads to, plenitude while unreal ones originate in privation and remain forever lacking. It is based on these criteria that real desire must be discerned and actively cultivated while unreal ones must be duly recognised and shunned. Then again, in the postal rhizomatic version of desire, the subject is

89 The Sanskrit equivalent here is kama (Radhakrishnan 492).

90 It has been said often enough that the ascetic traditions of India profess a virulent antipathy towards all desire. The contention is that by doing so they inaugurate a central paradox in their worldviews, viz., the undeniable valorisation of the desire to be desireless. I believe that the Upanishads, at least, for the most part, are able to avoid this conundrum. They are able to have their desire and spurn it too by the simple differentiation of desire into “real” and “unreal” desire. For instance, far from diminishing the importance of desire, the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad admits that:

... people say: “A person here consists simply of desire.” A man resolves in accordance with his desire, acts in accordance with his resolve, and turns out to be in accordance with his actions.... Now, a man who does not desire—who is without desires, who is freed from desires, whose desires are fulfilled, whose only desire is his self—his vital functions (prana) do not depart. Brahman is he, and to brahman he goes. (Olivelle 65; BU 4.4.5-6)

It is interesting to see how these lines understand “a man who does not desire.” As I see it, they do not say that he is simply one “who is without desires,” who is freed from desires.” They also go on to say that he is one “whose desires are fulfilled,” “whose only desire is his self.” In fact, I actually believe that the sentence is implying a causal relation between them: a man who does not desire is a man without desires. And he is without desires because he is freed from desires. But he is freed from his desires because his desires have been fulfilled. And his desires have been fulfilled because his only desire is his self!
peripheral to the energetic impetus; desire itself is an inhuman machinic flow; and radical difference is not reduced to some original or ultimate identity so that desire is continuously and multiply productive. The Upanishadic context almost offers a neat reversal. Here Brahman or the Supreme Self saturates all reality and real desire is merely an aspect of this atman. Creative desire might be "a pouring forth," which is the root meaning for the Sanskrit word for creation, srsti" (Ramanujan, "Some Thoughts on 'Non-Western' Classics" 119), but it is a flow that is clearly an outflow of/from the primal Self. Thus all worldly multiplicity, the "flux of lila," the "play of forms" (Hoskote 20) is subsumed in the metaphysical identity of Brahman so that desire is necessarily fissiparous. Indeed, such is the seeming incompatibility of positions that in the unlikely event of a face-off between them, the Upanishadic perspective would in all probability dismiss postal excogitation with its stress on absolute heterogeneity as so much avidya or ignorance and Deleuze and Guattari in their own turn would denigrate Upanishadic non-dual conceptions as classic arboreal thinking. Yet, differences and implicit mutual derogation notwithstanding, both conceive of a mode and modality for desire that is S/self satisfying and free from the yoke of necessity.

Pulling back from forays into matters peripheral and moving on to the subject germane to this exploration, what sort of implications might the Upanishadic understanding of desire delineated above have for the problematic of gender relations? For many reasons, I believe this is a vexed issue to address, one that repeatedly eludes the winnow of binary logic.

Firstly, the corpus of texts called the Upanishads spans several centuries and extends to more than two hundred texts. The Muktika Upanishad, supposed to be the last of these texts, canonises a hundred and eight Upanishads. Shankara wrote commentaries on eleven of these, which have since been more or less considered

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91 In this regard the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad says, "In the beginning this world was only brahman, only one. Because it was only one, brahman had not fully developed. It then created ..." (Olivelle 16; BU 1.4.11). Thus creation is also seen as a form of self-realisation through self-development/expansion/alienation.
the principal Upanishads. Secondly, “there is no uniform thematic unity or identity of philosophical point of view running through” the Upanishads (Banerjee “Vedanta and Neo-Vedanta” 141). Thirdly, authorship is indeterminate. The difficulty is aggravated “by the fact that some of the earliest and largest Upanisads—at least the Brhadaranyaka, the Chandogya, and the Kausitaki—are anthologies of material that must have existed as independent texts before their incorporation into these Upanisads by an editor or a series of editors. Several such source texts are included in more than one Upanisad…” (Olivelle xxxiv). What is available by way of identity are dialogues, debates, doctrines and instruction among and by famous rishis and sages who are named, such as Aruni, Yajnavalkya, Satyakama Jabala, Pravahana Jaivali, Gargi Vacaknavi, Balaki, Svetaketu, Sandilya, etc. Given this state of affairs, more than literary history and context, it is intra- and inter-textual evidence—in terms of the thought and incidents as well as the setting and medium—which is the better source,

92 According to Radhakrishnan, “the principal Upanisads are said to be ten. Samkara commented on eleven, Isa, Kena, Katha, Prasna, Mundaka, Mandukya, Taittiriya, Aitareya, Chandogya, Brhad-aranyaka and Svetasvatara. He also refers to the Kausitaki, Jabala, Mahanarayana and Paingala Upanisads in his commentary on the Brahma Sutra. These together with the Maitrayaniya or Maitri Upanisad constitute the principal Upanisads. Ramanuja uses all these Upanisads as also the Subala and the Culika. He mentions also the Garbha, the Jabala and the Maha Upanisads. Vidyaranya includes Nrsimhottara-tapani Upanisad among the twelve he explained in his Sarvopanisad-arthanubhuti-prakasa. The other Upanisads which have come down are more religious than philosophical. They belong more to the Purana and the Tantra than to the Veda. They glorify Vedanta or Yoga or Samnyasa or extol the worship of Siva, Sakti, or Visnu. Modern criticism is generally agreed that the ancient prose Upanisads, Aitareya, Kausitaki, Chandogya, Kena, Taittiriya and Brhad-aranyaka, together with Isā and Katha belong to the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.” (21). His second footnote on the page offers a summary about English translations of the Upanishads up to the 1950s and the debate among the early Western translators, Max Mueller, Duessen, Hume and Keith, “about the older and more original Upanisads” (21).

My own exploration here has been limited to the Upanishads translated by Radhakrishnan and Olivelle, i.e., the Principal Upanisads.

93 In his Introduction, Patrick Olivelle echoes Banerjee. To quote him, “These documents were composed over several centuries and in various regions, and it is futile to try to discover a single doctrine or philosophy in them (Upanisads xxiv).

94 In the native tradition, Upanishads as Vedanta are considered apaurusheya and sanatan, as revealed knowledge, which though elucidated by different seers and rishis is not of their authoring or interpretation. Rather it is only intuitively experienced by them and through them revealed to others.
oftentimes the only source, for analysing the gender implications of Upanishadic desire.

To which end, then, briefly, the Upanishads are written in Sanskrit. They usually depict different sorts of forest retreats. The subjects shown articulating them are sages, rishis and teachers, variously engaged in debate, dialogue, solitary speculation or explication for each other's benefit or for the student-seeker's benefit. Though men outnumber women by far in the Upanishadic canon, the latter are not entirely absent. Most famously you have Maitreyi and Gargi. The former, one of the two wives of Yajnavalkya, through her quest for knowledge gets Yajnavalkya to reveal brahmavidya to her. The latter engages as an equal with Yajnavalkya in a philosophical debate at King Janaka's court, where an assembly of scholars has been called to determine who is the most learned among them all. Both these women appear in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. Then there is Jabala, the mother of Satyakama who appears in the Chandogya Upanishad. When asked by her son about his lineage, because he wants to become a Vedic student, she gives the following matter-of-fact answer: "Son, I don't know what your lineage is. I was young when I had you. I was a maid then and had a lot of relationships. As such it is impossible for me to say what your lineage is. But my name is Jabala, and your name is Satyakama. So you should simply say that you are Satyakama Jabala" (Olivelle 130; CU IV.4.1). Whatever else this incident and how it plays out in the text may or may not suggest, it definitely shows that paternity while important was not the sole guarantor of legitimacy and social acceptance. Similarly, the fact that Gargi projects herself as the representative of all the scholars gathered in Janaka's court when she steps up to challenge and question Yajnavalkya; the fact that this does not raise any protest from others; the fact that Yajnavalkya accepts her challenge; the fact, then again, that Yajnavalkya

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95 While it is tempting to read in Jabala's admission of multiple relationships the sign of sexual freedom, I desist because she also says she had been a maidservant. That is to say, multiple sexual partners need not be the effect of choice; they could just as well be the mark of exactly the opposite—a lack of much say in the matter. For an informative account of "servile labour in ancient India," maidservants, among them, refer to Uma Chakravarti's "Of Dasas and Karmakaras" in Everyday Lives, Everyday Histories (70-100).
is more than happy to instruct an eager Maitreyi in the intricacies of ultimate Truth, suggests that rare as learned women and women’s learning may have been, neither these women nor their instruction perhaps was socially forbidden and loaded with negative connotations. If the texts are witness, therefore, women seemed to have access to spiritual knowledge. They also could engage freely in debates and were participants in assemblies of the learned. And students were not debarred from knowledge just because they did not know their father’s name—thus affording a glimpse, perhaps, of a caste sociality that was not as obsessively and oppressively fixated upon the patronymic as it was to become in later times. Having said that, it would only be appropriate to mention that women still were considered very much a part of the property of men. So that along with cattle, other wealth, a village, Janashruti Pautrayana also gifts his daughter to Raikva the gatherer, in exchange for the latter’s instruction for his spiritual advancement (Olivelle 129; CU IV.2.3-4).

But the above only refers to some of the material conditions of women’s existence as these may be inferred from the part they play in the Upanishads. How does the content of Upanishadic thought rate on a gender scale? Moreover, what may be some of the possible implications of its philosophical tenets from a gender perspective? I conclude this section with a brief engagement with precisely these questions.

Given that patriarchal social organisation is regularly premised on some form of gender differentiation that is then made the basis of the emasculation and degradation of women on a variety of fronts, the Upanishadic insistence on non-dualism and the power, plenitude and bliss of the desire for Self-realisation, is potentially revolutionary. Women, traditionally schooled to extreme self-(ab)negation could very well find the Upanishadic advocacy of an enduring love-affair with the supreme Self (which is also one’s innermost self) an invaluable

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96 As it seems to me, the obvious disproportion in the numbers of women and men who dispute, disquisition, dialogue and debate in the Upanishads suggests that while learning, philosophising as well as spiritual aspiration was not denied to women, it was not exactly commonplace either.
ally in encouraging self-expressions/assertions of socio-culturally inhibited female subjectivities. Of paramount importance here, however, becomes the question of women's access to these texts, which, as already noted, were composed in Sanskrit. While the early Upanishads themselves had women scholars, the evidence from classical times on is of a systematic denial of learning to women among the Hindu orthodoxy. In such a scenario, historically women's access to Upanishadic ideas has stood necessarily mediated by a dense network of male interpretations. Oftentimes, this has meant women being encouraged and acculturated to practice non-dualism only to the extent that subserves a blatantly sexist domestic ideology. Then again, there is a flip side to the Upanishadic injunctions. Its inflexible non-dualism refuses to grant any legitimacy to the notion of an independent Other or to any real difference. The Upanishads recognise only two modes of being: one of awareness and the other of ignorance. Awareness is realisation of the self and all else is ignorance. There is no real give and take between these two modalities of existence. In fact, they are as two dimensions of being and the Upanishads accord legitimacy to only one of these, the former. Not surprising, since it is quite preposterous to claim ignorance as a source of knowledge! In practice, such absolute conceptual Self-possession, however, can not only lead to extreme solipsism and narcissism but also to a complete blotting out of any other than the dominant paradigms of Self-understanding; since any alternative conceptualisation of Brahman is susceptible to being tagged *avidya* by the operative hegemonies of the time. Of course, it does not take a genius to realise just what this means for gender relations in patriarchal socio-cultural set-ups: exclusive legitimacy to a self that in its aspirations and experiences is, in the last instance, what is considered undeniably male/masculine by the culture concerned and a repudiation of all else as rank ignorance. Indeed the Upanishads themselves are not innocent of this egregious error and frequently

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97 *Maya* is not an Other or even simply non-existent, but the creative power of delusion of Brahman, which impedes and distorts perception of the Real, i.e., of itself.
reveal the putatively gender-neutral Brahman\textsuperscript{98} of their esoteric cogitations to be only too recognisably male/masculine.\textsuperscript{99}

**Desire as Pleasure**

Desire as sexual pleasure has an indigenous and antique provenance in Indian mythology where the god Kama is significantly enough married to Rati (passion/sexual intercourse) and Priti (sensual pleasure). Here I look for elaboration of the equation not in the tradition of legends that attached to this figure but in the oldest extant Indian treatise on *ars erotica*, viz., the *Kamasutra*\textsuperscript{100}.

\textsuperscript{98} According to Monier-Williams, grammatically the word *brahman* is of neuter gender. Literally, it means, among other things, “growth, expansion, evolution, development, swelling of the spirit or soul” (737). As I see it, Brahman understood thus recalls creative power not just as phallic tumescence, but also as a pregnant womb. For a gender politics this is useful, since symbolically the word is not exclusive to either sex, yet it is capable of representing them both.

\textsuperscript{99} Evidence of this slippage, for instance, can be found in the *Aitareya Upanishad*. On the three births of the self, it asserts:

In a person, indeed, this one first becomes an embryo. That which is semen is the vigour come together from all the limbs. In the self, indeed, one bears a self. When he sheds this in a woman, he then gives it birth. That is its first birth. It becomes one with the woman, just as a limb of her own. Therefore it does not hurt her. She nourishes this self of his that has come into her. She, being the nourisher, should be nourished. The woman bears him as an embryo. He nourishes the child before birth and after the birth. While he nourishes the child before birth and after the birth, he thus nourishes his own self, for the continuation of these worlds; for thus are these worlds continued. This is one’s second birth. He (the son) who is one self of his (father) is made his substitute for (performing) pious deeds. Then the other self of his (father’s) having accomplished his work, having reached his age, departs. So departing hence, he is, indeed, born again. That is his third birth. (Radhakrishnan 521-22; AU II.1-4)

In Irigarayan terms, this might be called a homosexual cosmology. The man here is clearly taken to be the principal and primary procreator while the woman appears merely as the secondary facilitator, vessel, instrument, etc. The question is, if the self is male, as the text seems to assert, then what is the ontological status of a woman? Is she a self as well, perhaps an other self? Non-dual Brahman, of course can accommodate such otherness. In the passage quoted above, however, the problem is that while the woman is othered, that otherness finds no reflection in the imagination of Brahman. Consequently, even as Brahman is meant to be non-gendered, its conceptualisation, more often than not, invokes it in ways that is specifically and exclusively masculine.

\textsuperscript{100} When I use this term, I do not wish to follow Foucault in the distinction he makes between “two great procedures for producing the truth of sex,” viz., *ars erotica* and *scientia sexualis*. Refer to his *The Will to Knowledge* (57-73) for further details.
Dated approximately to the latter half of the third century CE, the Kamasutra projects itself as a *sutraic* compendium, a comprehensive\(^{101}\) aphoristic primer on the science and practice of *kama*, where *kama* is understood as “a direct experience of an object of the senses, which bears fruit\(^{102}\) and is permeated by the sensual pleasure of erotic arousal that results from the particular sensation of touch” (Doniger and Kakar 8).\(^{103}\) Rebutting charges of superfluity from skeptics who opine that “since even animals manage sex by themselves, and since it goes on all the time, it should not have to be handled with the help of a text,” the codifier Mallanaga Vatsyayana, maintains,

because a man and a woman depend upon one another in sex, it requires a method, and this method is learned from the Kamasutra. The mating of animals, by contrast, is not based upon any method because they are not fenced in, they mate only when the females are in their fertile season and until they achieve their goal, and they act without thinking about it first. (Doniger and Kakar 9-10).

What’s more, in a significant departure from abstemious traditions of thought, the Kamasutra asserts the legitimacy of *kama*, albeit within limits.\(^{104}\) Far from being inimical to the cosmic and social order, *kama*, it reminds, is actually conducive to well-being, a crucial component of the *trivarga purusharthas* prevalent at the time\(^{105}\): “Pleasures are a means of sustaining the body, just like food, and they are

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\(^{101}\) According to Vatsyayana, the Kamasutra compiled and condensed earlier works on the subject. After providing an impressive genealogy for his effort, a genealogy that extends to the mythological (Nandin, Shiva’s servant as the original composer of the *kamashastra*) and into antiquity (Shvetaketu Auddalaki, the Upanishadic sage as its next editor), he concludes, “Because the amputated limbs of the texts that Dattaka and the others divided are just parts of the whole, and because Babhravya’s text is so long that it is hard to study, Vatsyayana condensed the entire subject matter into a small volume to make this Kamasutra” (Doniger and Kakar 5).

\(^{102}\) That is, sexual release—orgasm as well as progeny, preferably sons.

\(^{103}\) Burton’s translation glosses it thus: “Kama is the enjoyment of appropriate objects by the five senses of hearing, feeling, seeing, tasting, and smelling, assisted by the mind together with the soul. The ingredient in this is a peculiar contact between the organ of sense and its object, and the consciousness of pleasure that arises from the contact is called Kama” (64).

\(^{104}\) While the Kamasutra diverges from the ascetic tradition in its espousal of the cause of *kama*, it nonetheless, does not break away from the same. For more details on the Kamasutra’s “conversations” with the ascetic tradition, refer to the Introduction of Doniger and Kakar’s translation of the text (xiii-xiv).

\(^{105}\) To quote Nupur Chaudhuri and Rajat Kanta Ray, “One of the first references to *purushartha* in its technical sense occurs in the Manusambhita…. Manu the early Brahmanical legislator equates *purushartha* with *prayojana* or need, purpose, aim. This is a departure from the twin epics’ equation of the word *purushartha* with *purushakara* (manliness) as opposed to *daiva* (fate)....
rewards for religion [dharma] and power [artha].”

According to the Kamasutra, sexual desire is legitimately geared towards two goals—progeny and pleasure. This last especially must not be taken as absolute license to the voluptuary, for ultimately, both legitimate progeny and pleasure are subject to the curbs of shastraic injunctions and customary prejudices. The Kamasutra is quite emphatic on this point and comes up with a clear-cut list of do’s and don’ts for the conduct of the mating game:

Pleasure enjoyed according to texts, with a woman who is of the man’s own class, and who has not been with another man before, is a means of getting sons, a good reputation, and social acceptance. But with women of higher classes or with women married to other men, pleasure will achieve none of these things, and it is forbidden. And it is neither encouraged nor forbidden with courtesans, second-hand women, and women of lower classes who have not been expelled from society, because the only purpose of such liaisons is pleasure. (Doniger and Kakar 22)

It is only having thus assiduously established the respectability, relevance and hierarchised limits of kama that the text launches into its categorical descriptive, prescriptive and proscriptive pseudo-scientific disquisition on sex and sexual practices.

A few pages into the text, however, and it becomes clear that the Kamasutra is not about everyman’s amatory life. Rather it is self-confessedly the delineation of the sex life of the “man-about-town,” also known as the “citizen” or “nagaraka.” The point is the personage so called is not just any ordinary denizen, man or woman, of a polity. He is quite specifically a man, of some wealth and considerable leisure. He is also an urban phenomenon, suave and cultured, not

While both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata talk about purushartha in the sense of manliness or purushakara, the Manusamhita means by it the aims of life, and spells out the constituents of the three-fold purushartha scheme: if a king wield the rod, danda, justly, then the trivarga consisting of dharma, artha and kama, flourishes” (“The Fifth Aim of Life” 226-27). The Kamasutra functions largely within this trivarga scheme of the purusharthas.

Even more apropos perhaps, the Burton translation reads, “pleasures, being as necessary for the existence and well-being of the body as food, are consequently equally required. They are, moreover, the results of Dharma and Artha. Pleasures are, therefore, to be followed with moderation and caution” (67).

This last in itself is a significant admission. Pleasure is here recognised as a valid aim for itself. It no longer needs to dissimulate as a desire for sons to find admittance even in connubial intercourse. Of course, for courtesans the acquisition of artha or wealth is also a valid reason for sexual desire.
some rustic troglodyte with parochial tastes. In fact, this is how the text describes him:

When a man has become educated, he enters the householder stage of life and begins the lifestyle of a man-about-town, using the money that he has inherited, on the one hand, or obtained from gifts, conquest, trade, or wages, on the other, or form both. He settles down in a city, a capital city, a market town, or some large gathering where there are good people, or wherever he has to stay to make a living. And there he makes his home in a house near water, with an orchard, separate servant quarters, and two bedrooms. (Doniger and Kakar 17)

Insofar as the *Kamasutra* is centrally concerned with this entity and his various sexual needs, it seems to me principally about urban elite sexual practices, about *kama* in the life of the rich and the powerful. Even Book Six, which has courtesans de luxe as its principal focus, does not really confute this reading. Since, both the text as well as commentators and scholars seem agreed that these were rarely accomplished and sought after ladies; a far cry from the degradation and squalor commonly associated with prostitutes today. In fact, the *ganika*, the courtesan de luxe accomplished in the sixty-four arts of the *kamashastra*, was an integral component, a staple feature and fixture in the polygamous, patriarchal, urban, courtly culture of which the *nagaraka* is the symbolic representative; she was the coveted female mechanism necessary to satisfy, and best equipped to cater to, appetites whetted by the systemic concentration of leisure, wealth and libidinal license in the *nagaraka*. And it is a measure of both the power and respect this class of women enjoyed in the public life of the times that Vatsyayana not only devotes a whole book to them and their codes, but as Doniger and

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108 According to Doniger and Kakar, this word covered “princes and barons, high state officials, and wealthy merchants” who were also the “primary intended audience” of the text (xlii).

109 According to Shastri, for instance, “The difference between the courtesan [veshya] and the courtesan de luxe [ganika] is the difference between the earth and the sky. The most beautiful, talented and virtuous among the courtesans was given the title of courtesan de luxe.... The daughters of these courtesans de luxe had the right to study together with the sons of men-about-town. In fact, a courtesan de luxe was regarded as the wealth and glory of the entire kingdom. The whole society was proud of her.... The courtesan is an uncommon woman whose upbringing and education is also extraordinary. She is educated in a way that facilitates physical and mental development, an education of which ordinary women are deprived...” (as qtd. in Doniger and Kakar xxix).

110 In the words of the *Kamasutra*, “A courtesan who distinguishes herself in these arts/ and who has a good nature, beauty, and good qualities/ wins the title of Courtesan de Luxe/ and a place in
Kakar tell us in their introduction, the book itself (Book Six, that is) is supposed to have been “commissioned by the courtesans de luxe of Pataliputra, presumably for their own use” (xxix).\(^{111}\)

Further evidence for the text’s urbane focus and orientation is to be had in its overall timbre, in the ambience it communicates. Despite being a \textit{shastra} and therefore bound to the compositional discipline of that mode, in the words of Doniger and Kakar,

the feeling-tone of the \textit{Kamasutra}’s eroticism is primarily one of lightness. In its pages, we meet leisured gallants who spend hours in personal grooming and teaching their mynah birds and parrots to speak. Their afternoons and evenings are devoted to drinking, music and dance; that is, when they are not busy in talking poetry and engaging in sexual banter with artful courtesans. In its light-hearted eroticism, the \textit{Kamasutra} is part of a literary climate during the first six centuries of the common era when the erotic was associated with all that was bright, shining and beautiful in the ordinary world. The Sanskrit poems and dramas of this period are also characterized by this lightness, an eroticism more hedonist than impassioned. The mood is a playful enjoyment of love’s ambiguities, a delighted savouring of its pleasures, and a consummately refined suffering of its sorrows. The poems are cameos yielding glimpses into arresting erotic moments, their intensity enhanced by the accumulation of sensuous detail. (xlii-xliii)

Narendra Nath Bhattacharyya, in his \textit{History of Indian Erotic Literature}, I believe, rightly identifies this sensibility, which the \textit{Kamasutra} shares with Sanskrit dramas and poetry of the times, as reflective of the temper of contemporary courtly culture and the tastes of its dominant classes. To quote him, “[t]he ideals of this section of peoples was reflected in secular literature, in the sophisticated dramatic and poetical works, and contributed to the growth of a specialised type of erotic literature” (31).\(^{112}\)

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\(^{111}\) The reference is to Dattaka, one of the earlier author-editors of the \textit{kamashastras}, who, among other things, made courtesans the subject of his exposition of \textit{kama}, and whom Vatsyayana follows by retaining the focus in his distillation of the \textit{kama} tradition. For more details, refer to the note on the 11\(^{th}\) \textit{shloka} of chapter 1 in Book One of the \textit{Kamasutra} (Doniger and Kakar 4-5).

\(^{112}\) For a more detailed though censorious overview of the Sanskrit court dramas and poetry of the times in which the \textit{Kamasutra} was put together as also the courtly culture which inspired them all, refer to Bhattacharyya’s chapter on the “Erotic in Sanskrit Literature: Role of Urbanism” in his \textit{History of Indian Erotic Literature}.  

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Nor is this the only way in which the regimen of erotic pleasure which the *Kamasutra* prescribes, functions as an engagement of, and with, power. For one, it is manifestly aware of the destructive potential of a rampant and unchecked sexuality. As it notes, "sex is a form of quarrelling, because the very essence of desire is argument, and its character is perverse" (Doniger and Kakar 56). In some ways the whole rationale of the text is to bring method to this madness,\(^{113}\) because letting these fractious impulses run amok would be to invite certain disaster. Then again, it is replete with ploys for gaining power/influence over one's sexual partner: whether these be methods of persuasion as detailed from Book Three onwards or occult methods with exotic charms, potions and instruments as elaborated in Book Seven. All said and done thus, the *Kamasutra* can be described as a treatise on *kama* that arrogates to itself the traditional authority of a *shastra*, written from a projected position of power/knowledge about powerful people routinely channelising powerful sexual drives to experience powerful pleasures; it is a text in which the pleasures of sexual intercourse operate as a fraught site for the negotiation and communication of various power relations.

One such negotiation and communication of power occurs in the different gender interactions that the text envisages. Given its thematics, of course, it is hardly surprising that the *Kamasutra* should be of some considerable interest to those grappling with the structural politics regulating sexual relations. In fact, it has been time and again enlisted to support a whole gamut of positions, from the smutty and the conservative to the liberal and the radical.\(^{114}\) In my reckoning this is possible only because the text lends itself with some facility to these contrary

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\(^{113}\) For further elaboration, refer to Doniger and Kakar (9-10) where Vatsyayana talks of the need for "method" in the sexual exchanges between men and women, and (59) where the text cites instances of women being seriously maimed or killed by the excessive and uncontrolled passions of their partners.

\(^{114}\) For an idea of the wide array of uses that the *Kamasutra* has been put to, refer to Doniger and Kakar (lxiv-lxvi). For an example of a liberal-conservative reading of the *Kamasutra*, see Chaturvedi Badrinath, "Kamasutra: Art of Love." A liberal and/or radical position on the text could, apart from justifying the claims of various traditionally disenfranchised sexual communities, also make a case for conventionally frowned upon sexual activities, such as sexual role-play, bisexuality, s/m, oral and anal sex, the use of different aphrodisiacs and sexual props and devices, etc.
appropriations. For instance, quite in the hallowed Shastraic traditions of misogynistic pronouncements, the Kamasutra, too, pontificates on the relative svabhavik immorality of women:

A woman is different in this regard: A woman does not consider religion or the violation of religion; she just desires. And by her nature she resists a man who makes advances to her, even if she desires to respond. If he makes advances to her again and again, however, she gives in. A man, by contrast, considers the stability of religion and the conventions of the people and turns back even when he desires. And even when he is pursued he does not give in, because he is aware of these considerations.... (Doniger and Kakar 104-05)

Similarly in its descriptions of marital relations, the Kamasutra is far from questioning the self-abnegating non-reciprocal116 demands of stridharma or pativrata dharma enjoined upon the wife:

An only wife, with deep, intimate trust, trusts her husband like a god and always acts in ways compatible with him. Following his thinking, she takes on herself his cares about the household.... Only with his permission does she go to a betrothal, a wedding, or a sacrifice, or get together with her girlfriends, or visit the gods.... She lies down after, gets up before him, and never wakes him when he is asleep.... Mildly offended by the man's infidelities, she does not accuse him too much.... She refrains from bad language, nasty looks, talking while avoiding his gaze, standing at the doorway or gazing from it, chatting in the park or lingering in deserted places.... (Doniger and Kakar 94-95)

115 That history as an unfolding of masculine lust, covetousness, excess and infidelities proves this to be a preposterous canard hardly needs to be mentioned here. I believe that such assertions are more the guilty and/or fearful projections of a patriarchal imagination masquerading as objective descriptions of ground realities. After all would it not be perfectly understandable for women to be actively subversive of religious and social conventions that emasculate them so ruthlessly? Why then should it be unlikely that it is a subconscious awareness of these unjust systems of social organisation as well as an anxiety for their perpetuity that feeds these egregious descriptions? In fact, the wonder is not that women might be unmindful of these patriarchal socio-religious conventions but that they are mindful of them at all, continue to be so, and in such large numbers!

116 Of course, once the wife's self is nullified, the question of reciprocity cannot quite arise with the same urgency.

117 If anything, the complete abasement of the wife is even more starkly evident in the predicament of the "wife unlucky in love":

a woman who is unlucky in love and oppressed by rivalry with her co-wives seeks support from the wife who seems to be chosen most often by their husband.... She performs the functions of a nurse for the man's children. She wins over his friends and then gets them to tell him about her devotion to him. She leads the way in religious duties and in vows and fasts.... In bed she requites the man's passion in a way that suits him. She does not scold him or show him any contrariness. She restores his desire for any woman with whom he may have quarrelled. If he desires some woman who must remain concealed, she brings the other woman to him and hides her. She takes pains to make the man regard her as a chaste and undeceiving wife. That is the life of the wife unlucky in love. (Doniger and Kakar 101)
And when it comes to actual sexual intercourse, the *Kamasutra* not only rehearses well-worn sexist clichés about masculine agency and feminine passivity; it not only naturalises male sexual violence and female masochism (indeed, as mentioned before, it generalises sexual desire as intrinsically belligerent); but most disturbingly, it also seems to dispossess women of a language in which they might legitimately register dissent. In a chilling display of the all-too-common distortionate patriarchal control over semiotic codes—its communication, dissemination and representation—there’s scarcely a sound that a woman might make, scarcely a gesture or an attitude that she might adopt in protest, pain or refusal whilst engaged in sexual intercourse that is not either summarily dismissed as pretense, or, even more machiavellianly, interpreted as a sign of active encouragement, of conscious stimulation, of heightened ardour (*vide* Doniger and Kakar, bk. 2, ch. 7). But this is not the whole story, for the *Kamasutra* also talks affirmatively about the female orgasm. Not only is its reality asserted but it is also considered to be similar to male sensual pleasure and significantly the *Kamasutra* neither vilifies this expression of feminine sexuality nor denies its expectations for satisfaction:

> Since there is no difference in the species of a couple, they seek a similar sensual pleasure. Therefore the woman should be treated in such a way that she achieves her sexual climax first. (Doniger and Kakar 35)

This recognition of their sexuality and its needs as natural and healthy, of course, is no trivial matter for women mostly subject either to stereotypical cultural

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118 For instance, the following passage: “By his physical nature, the man is the active agent and the young woman is the passive locus…. The man is aroused by the thought, ‘I am taking her,’ the young woman is aroused by the thought, ‘I am being taken by him’” (Doniger and Kakar 34).

119 That the text itself is aware of the sinister nature of such “love-play” can be gauged by the fact that it admits that in “excess” such passion might result in irreparable injury, mutilation and/or fatality for the woman. Although the advice is given and applies to both men and women, I refer to women here exclusively because all the victims Vatsyayana mentions, of sadistic coupling, are conspicuously female. For further details, refer to Doniger and Kakar (58-59).

120 According to Vatsyayana, the difference in the male and female experience of sexual pleasure and arousal is of method only, not of kind: “Men’s sensual pleasure comes at the end of sex,/ but women’s is continual./ And the wish to stop occurs/ only when fluids are used up” (Doniger and Kakar 34).
deification as asexual, impossibly selfless and benevolent mother-figures or
demonisation as equally incredible voracious and malevolent sexual
temptresses. In fact, on the whole, even though written with the “man-about-
town” as the principal subject, the Kamasutra encourages men to give as well as
take pleasure. That this might ultimately be for the greater enjoyment of the
male does nothing to arrest its general thrust towards “humanising” the sexual
encounter. Then again, in its exposition of various sexual practices, it allows
for a variety of roles to be played by both partners, it recognises situations with
multiple partners and various combinations, and is fairly non-judgemental about
gender-role inversions, as long as it’s only for the duration of, or part of the
duration of, sexual congress. What’s more, if it is punctilious about inscribing its
textual regimen of sexual pleasure, then it also recognises its own limitations with
remarkable sang-froid:

> The territory of the text extends
> only so far as men have dull appetites;
> but when the wheel of sexual ecstasy is in full motion,
> there is no textbook at all, and no order. (Doniger and Kakar 42)

Apart from this, the text is also notable for the fact that it has women speaking in
Sanskrit and very clearly intends at least some women to read it. As it says, “A

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121 Michele Barrett, in another context, understands such extreme dichotomous postulations to
exemplify the strategy of “compensation” evident in patriarchal social set-ups. For further details,
refer to her essay, “Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender.”

122 All of Book Three, for instance, is devoted to the wooing and winning of the virgin bride. The
elaborate, slow and sensuous seduction, it advocates is meant to win the love, trust and pleasurable
participation of the young partner and not just her mute submission.

123 In the words of Doniger and Kakar, “Erotic pleasure [in the Kamasutra] partakes of the moral
order and of instinctual desire at the same time as it seeks to emancipate itself from both. As a flag
bearer of the erotic, the Kamasutra is a champion of sensible pleasure” (xlii).

124 As Doniger and Kakar note, “Book Three devotes one section to advice to [sic] virgins trying
to get husbands… Book Four consists of instructions for wives” and Book Six is about and for
courtesans (xxviii). That said, I believe, Kumkum Roy has a point when she seeks to link the texts
compositional style, “its juxtaposition of prose and verse” with the conditional access to itself that
the Kamasutra envisages for most women. To quote her:

> While the bulk of the text is composed in prose sutras or sentences, which are, more
> often than not, burdened with technical jargon and require careful elucidation, each
> subsection ends with a set of one or more sloka. These were composed in the popular
> anustubh metre…. The difference between prose and verse elements is not simply
> stylistic: while in some cases the verses summarise the contents of the preceding
woman should do this [study the Kamasutra] before she reaches the prime of her youth, and she should continue when she has been given away, if her husband wishes it..." (Doniger and Kakar 13). It goes on to identify “courtesans de luxe and the daughters of kings and ministers of state” (Doniger and Kakar 14), specifically, as women who have gained by a familiarity with the text. Additionally, the Kamasutra mentions widows kept by ministers of states or kings (Doniger and Kakar 25) without repeating either the orthodox characterisation of them as inauspicious or displaying much horror or outrage at the evidence of their active sexual lives. In chapter five of Book Five, then again, while trotting out one of the oldest ruses for rationalising male sexual profligacy and predation, the text both shows a glimpse of the vulnerability of women and also acknowledges, albeit in passing, the hypocrisy of the men involved. Speaking of “The Sex Life of a Man in Power,” such as kings and ministers of state, it says:

Therefore, because it is impossible and because they would be blamed, such men do nothing frivolous. But when they cannot help doing it, they employ stratagems. A young village headman, or the king’s officer, or the son of the superintendent of farming, can win village women just with a word, and then libertines call these women adulteresses. Sex with these women takes place when they are engaged in such activities as doing chores, filling granaries, bringing things in and out of houses, cleaning house, working in the field, purchasing cotton, wool, flax, linen and bark, spinning thread, and buying, selling and exchanging goods. And in the same manner, the man in charge of the cow-herds may take the women of the cow-herds; the man in charge of threads may take widows, women who have no man to protect them, and wandering women ascetics; the city police-chief may take the women who roam about begging, for he knows where they are vulnerable, because of his own nocturnal roamings; and the man in charge of the market may take the women who buy and sell. (Doniger and Kakar 122)

Similarly, on the subject of a woman’s reluctance to commit adultery, as Doniger and Kakar comment, “This discussion is ostensibly intended to teach the male reader of the text to manipulate and exploit such women, but, perhaps inadvertently, it provides a compassionate exposition of the reasons why inadequate husbands drive away their wives” (xxxix-xxxii).

prose, in others, the message of the verses is barely in line with the more weighty prose, while in yet others, prose and verse stand in sharp contradiction to one another. (“Unravelling the Kamasutra” 58).

According to Roy, since, “women were to be taught by other women, who were by definition excluded from direct access to the sastras and Sanskrit learning, the complexities of the text in terms of both style and content would have to be simplified. In other words, the text would have to be converted into oral formulae or dicta, suitable for transmission to a non-scholastic audience...’ (“Unravelling the Kamasutra” 57-58).
Not surprisingly, given its flexibility, its pragmatic liberalism and sexual catholicity, various traditionally disenfranchised sexual constituencies and practices have tended to find in the *Kamasutra* a useful rallying point for their respective causes. So, for instance, the market today has various editions of the *Kamasutra* specifically meant for women. Likewise, there have been efforts to read the *Kamasutra* for its same-sex depictions. Be that as it may, in the final analysis, I would still hesitate to characterise the text per se as a manifesto of sexual liberation or as arguing for a substantial reordering of gender relations in its own times. Rather I understand its textual ambivalence as the inevitable outcome of the different pressures, sensibilities and interests that a) effected its production and b) continue to bear on its consumption in the different historical contexts in which it finds a readership. Thus, although a bit too positive, I tend to agree with the basic thrust of Doniger’s and Kakar’s analytical reconciliation of the predominantly conservative aim and yet undeniably subversive potential of the *Kamasutra*, when they write:

we must admit that we find these voices, carrying meanings that have value for us, only by transcending, if not actually disregarding, the original context. Were we to remain within the strict bounds of the historical situation, we could not notice the women’s voices speaking against their moment in history, perhaps even against their author. Only by asking our own questions, which the author may not have considered at all, can we see that his text does contain many answers to them, fortuitously embedded in other questions and answers that were more meaningful to him. (xxxiii)

**Desire as Power**

"Of all the emotions man suffers from," she explained, "sex and sex-oriented emotions demand the most vital sacrifice. It is the most demanding and the most

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125 Two of the latest such offerings in the Indian market are editions by Sandhya Mulchandani and Alka Pande. The former’s is called *Kama Sutra for Women* (Roli Books) because “women want to feel empowered” and the latter’s is called *The New Age Kama Sutra for Women*. According to Pande, "*The New Age Kama Sutra for Women* is a text written from the gaze of a woman. Most of the translations and interpretations of the *Kama Sutra* have been written by men and, therefore, the gaze has been patriarchal..." (Sen, "Love Story" 8).

126 Mention here can be made, for instance, of Sandhya Mulchandani’s, illustrated *The Same-Sex Kama Sutra* as also Colin Spencer’s *The Gay Kamasutra*, Terry Sanderson’s *Gay Man’s Kama Sutra*, and Kat Harding’s *The Lesbian Kama Sutra*.

127 For a gender-sensitive, summary account of these, refer to Kumkum Roy’s essay, “Unravelling the Kamasutra” (52-76).
daring of emotions, it is also the most self-centred, next to hunger. It adores the self most, and hates to share its joy and consummation. It is wanted the most, it is regretted the most. It is creative; it is destructive. It is joy, it is sorrow. Bow to sex, the lhadini.”

To many of the middle classes in India today, sex and spirituality might make for strange bedfellows, but bedfellows they undoubtedly are, and share an intimate relationship in several Indian thought systems. Sexual intercourse has often been invested with tremendous metaphysical significance in different eschatological paradigms. If, on the one hand the sexual act has been sacralised as a metaphysically charged repetition of primal cosmic creation and so religiously prescribed, then seminal obsessions have equally generated a conservative horror for ejaculatory ecstasies and fed the fires of ascetic tapasya. Either way, sex and sexual energy/emissions have been regarded as mystically energised shakti and crucially implicated in the quest for spiritual prowess. Not surprisingly, sex as yajna, sex as sadhana, sex as bhakti—all of these at some point or the other have found esoteric expression in the annals of Indian spirituality. In this section,

128 Part of the last words that the Tantric yogini Lady in Saffron, and guru to B. Bhattacharya, addresses to him, as recounted in his The World of Tantra (448). The text glosses lhadini as the “power that enthuses activity” (461).

129 This perhaps finds its most popular iconic figuration in the grotesque person of Shiva, whom Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty pithily calls the “erotic ascetic”: “permanently ithyphallic, yet perpetually chaste” (Robert Charles Zaehner as ctd. in Siva 5)

130 For instance, the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad draws an explicit parallel between informed sexual intercourse and the performance of the Soma sacrifice. This is enabled through the overdetermination of the female genitalia as the sacrificial site suitably accoutred and saturated with ritual significance. The text explains this Upanishadic homology thus:

Prajapati then thought to himself: “Now why don’t I prepare a base for that semen?”
So he created woman and, after creating her, had intercourse with her. A man, therefore, should have intercourse with a woman. Prajapati stretched out from himself the elongated stone for pressing Soma and impregnated her with it.
Her vulva is the sacrificial ground; her pubic hair is the sacred grass; her labia majora are the Soma-press; and her labia minora are the fires blazing at the center. A man who engages in sexual intercourse with this knowledge obtains as great a world as a man who performs a Soma sacrifice, and he appropriates to himself the merits of the woman with whom he has sex. The women, on the other hand, appropriate to themselves the merits of a man who engages in sexual intercourse with them without this knowledge. (Olivelle 88; BU 6.4.2-3)

The subsequent passages continue to reinforce the Vedic sacrificial investment of sexual intercourse by dwelling on the manner in which one could control its consequences by mastering its ritualistic performance (Olivelle 89-91; BU 6.4.9-21). Clearly, primal power in this paradigm is located in practical knowledge of the imbrications of sex and sacrifice.
I propose to explore the Tantric conjugation of sex and spirituality in sadhana, which inscribes the character of desire as power.

The Tantras, belonging to the Agama and Nigama traditions, roughly date back to the fifth century CE.¹³¹ According to the derivation of ‘Tantra’ from Tan, to spread, Tantra is that (Scripture) by which knowledge (Jnana) is spread (Tanyate, vistaryate jnanam anena, iti Tantram). The suffix Tra is from the root ‘to save.’ That knowledge is spread which saves” (John Woodroffe as ctd. in Saxena 24). It is within such a frame that sexual energy stands essentially recognised, realised and propitiated as the cosmic reality in the recondite tenets of Tantra—symbolically in Dakshinachara/Samayachara Tantra and more literally in Vamachara and Kaula Tantra, through the ritual practice of the panca tattva makara (madira, matsya, mamsa, mudra, maithuna) that culminates in sexual intercourse.¹³² For, as David Kinsley writes, “In the context of Tantra, sexual attraction, sexual behavior, and sexual intercourse suggest the underlying texture of reality, which is the manifestation of the dynamic, energetic, creative, and harmonious interaction of Shiva and Shakti” (Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine 242). Needless to say, the Tantric ritual apparatus reveals a palpable and extensive use of sexual symbolism and foregrounds the sexual, be it in its mantras, yantras, mudras, pujas, nyasa and/or valorisation of the lingam and yoni as the iconic representations of Shiva and Shakti.

¹³¹ There have, of course, been attempts made to trace the lineage of Tantra back to Vedic and Vedantic times and sources but these have just as hotly been disputed. For a handy discussion on dating the Tantras, refer to David N. Lorenzen’s essay in Who Invented Hinduism? called “Early Evidence for Tantric Religion.” According to him, “the earliest clear and datable evidence of full-blown Tantric religion appears in four seventh-century A.D. literary texts written in Sanskrit: Banabhatta’s Kadambari and Harshacarita, Mahendravarma’s Mattavilasa, and Dandin’s Dasakumaracarita. The Tantric texts themselves seem to nearly all date from a slightly or considerably later period, from approximately the eighth to the eighteenth centuries” (66). He goes on to say, that “while some components are quite ancient, the complex as a whole cannot be documented before the fifth or sixth centuries A.D.” (67).

¹³² The Tantric tradition comprises of many texts, many of which are no longer extant. Some texts fix the number of Tantras at 64 but this is a convenient determination rather than an exact one. For a listing of some of these, with the number of shlokas to each, refer to D. N. Bose and Hiralal Haldar’s Tantras (25-26).
But what exactly are all these arcane rites geared towards? How do they hope to achieve their goal? The following passage from the *Vamaka Ishvara Tantra*, I believe, provides a cryptic glimpse of both the fundamental methodology and teleology of Tantra:

> One should cultivate desire (kama) by means of desire,
> One should cast desire into desire. Desiring by means
> of desire, abiding in desire, one should stir the world. (4.46 as ctd. in Feuerstein 224)

Of course, there are different ways in which one might “stir the world[!]” The tantric *sadhaka* (seeker/practitioner) undertakes the life of *sadhana* for various *siddhis* (powers)—some of a more material, terrestrial and/or immediate concern, others of a more spiritual and transcendental aspiration. Willy-nilly Tantra entails the arousal of the *kundalini shakti* or serpent power lying coiled in the *muladhara chakra*. The *kundalini shakti* is supposed to be the microcosmic equivalent of the dynamic macrocosmic feminine principle, Shakti, embedded in each one of us. The attempt is to awaken this power and consciously facilitate its ascension through the many *chakras* till it reaches the *sahasrara chakra*, the locus of Shiva or the quiescent masculine principle for,

> In the thousand-petalled lotus, *Sahasrara*, you sport with your lord in secret, having traversed the entire path of *kundalini*, viz., the element of earth in *Muladhara*, water in *Manipura*, fire in *Svadhishthana*, air in *Anahata*, ether above it in *Vishuddhi* and

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133 For an identification and description of the *ashtasiddhi* that is attained when the *kundalini shakti* is awakened, refer to Bose and Haldar (133). As Feuerstein notes, “The fully accomplished Tantric adept (*siddha*) is not merely a liberated being but also a thaumaturgist for whom the laws of the material cosmos are no limitation. Thus, like Shiva, the adept is *shaktimaṇḍpa*—possessed of power. The paranormal powers (*siddhi*) are simply manifestations of the divine Power, or *shakti*” (261). This, as he goes on to show, contrasts with the Advaitic position, which “regard[s] them with great suspicion and frequently advice[s] against their cultivation or use.” According to Feuerstein their “attitude is a direct product of the Advaitic metaphysics that conceives of nature as *maya*, or pseudoreality. A philosophy that considers the world itself as dangerous to the spiritual practitioner must be expected to transfer this belief to all conceivable interactions with the illusory world. Thus the paranormal powers that arise within a finite human body can only serve the cause of delusion and bondage to the world. Therefore they must be rejected or at least never used or displayed” (260).

134 For a helpful account of the Tantric understanding of the *chakras* or nodes of subtle energy in the human body, refer to Bose and Haldar (128-139) and Feuerstein (148-160).

135 Tantra is premised on the belief that there is absolute correspondence of being: *yad ihastiti tad anyatra yan nehasti na tat kvacit* or “What is here is elsewhere; what is not here is nowhere” (*Vishva Sara Tantra*, as ctd. in and trans. by Feuerstein 61), and, furthermore, on the dictum that Bettina Baumer identifies in her preface to Jaideva Singh’s translation of the *Paratrishika-Vivarana*, viz., *sarvam sarvatmakam* or “everything is related to everything else” (Abhinavagupta xvii).
the mind in Ajna between the eye-brows. (*Saundaryalahari of Sankaracarya* 5; verse 9)

As is clear, “The rising of the kundalini shakti and the bliss of her union with Shiva in the sahasrara chakra may be symbolized by sexual union” (Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine* 244). Sexual intercourse as the coming together of opposites, of man and woman, the merging of dichotomies, the union of Shiva-Shakti, and hence the realisation of the supreme aim of Tantra, i.e., the oneness of being, consciousness, bliss, *satchitananda*, is thus either symbolically or experientially charged with metaphysical significance in Tantric paradigms.

And if, put this way, the final aim of the Tantras sound confusingly like Vedantic insights, it would help, among other things, to remember the mode of worship favoured by this heterodox “faith,” also known as the *sadhana-shastra*. Briefly put, Tantric worship is conceived in the heroic mode. Their practice, as Lynn Teskey Denton notes, is a “fierce discipline (uttejakasadhana)” (“Varieties of Hindu Female Asceticism,” 225). Because, in the words of B. Bhatacharya, “Tantra dares the dangers. A tantrik is a *vira* (hero). That is why in tantra each success registered finds a hundred fallen ‘heroes’…. It is dancing on the hood of a cobra; riding a hungry tiger. Hobnobbing will not do. Dilettantes, conceits and cynics beware!” (169). In fact, along with “great strength of will and character[,] a Tantric initiate] must also excel in faith (shraddha)” (Feuerstein 121). Its antinomian creed and practices, especially the *panca tattva makara* rituals, are meant, through radical reversal and sacrilege, to destroy the fear of mortality that has the *sadhaka* in its thrall. As Kinsley writes:

> [t]he logic or intention of this ritual appears to be related to perceiving or intensely realizing the basic truth that all reality, all things, are pervaded by *shakti*, the goddess herself, or *brahman*. By partaking of forbidden things, one affirms that ultimately there is nothing that is not the goddess, that nothing is polluting, for she pervades all. Such distinctions as “pure” and “polluting” impose artificial qualifications on the manifestation of the goddess as the physical world. The *panca tattva* ritual seeks to abolish a mentality that perceives the world according to artificial human constructs,
that perceives the essentially unified world that is the goddess (or brahman ...) as fractured and divided. (*Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine* 55)

Overlaps in metaphysics notwithstanding, therefore, the Tantric siddhas/yoginis are different from the Vedantic seers who were his/her forbears in time, as well as from the Advaitic acharyas and the Bhakti saints who are more or less contemporaneous. 137

And just for the record also, the Tantric understanding and deployment of desire and sexuality is very different from the one elaborated in the *Kamasutra*. The latter is orgasmically driven and by and large eschews a religious vocabulary to express its sensuous concerns—the maximisation of pleasure. 138 It focusses on the aesthetics of sex, on the *shringara rasa* and its principal subjects are the established aesthete and the accomplished courtesans de luxe. It recognises the elemental power of the sexual drive *qua* sexuality and tries to attenuate its destructive effects by codifying it. Tantra, on the other hand, stresses the instrumental role and ritualistic performance of sex in which sensuous pleasure for its own sake is abjured. This achieves a transmogrified admittance, however, as the experiential realisation of Ultimate Bliss. As the *Kaula Arnava Tantra* says:

> Drinking wine, eating meat, and gazing at the face of one's beloved are not [in themselves] behaviours leading to the supreme state. Only your devotees [O Goddess] and none other know this vision of kula, which bestows enjoyment and liberation and is obtainable through the guru's compassion. (2.112-113 as ctd. in Feuerstein 231; bracketed inserts Feuerstein's)

Thus sexual desire is affirmatively recognised as metaphysically charged and it is this force that the sadhaka seeks to tap, harness and/or awaken. Interestingly, as against the "orgasmic" *Kama Sutra*, Tantra has often been called orgiastic. The

137 A figure like Lalla Ded, however, immediately brings home the difficulties of maintaining too neat a distinction between these categories and their respective metaphysics as well. She can be seen as a Tantric avadhuta (Sanjukta Gupta “Women in the Saiva Sakta Ethos” 199-201) as a bhakti saint (Paul E. Murphy, *Triadic Mysticism* 84-108) or as a Sufi arifa (Durre S Ahmed, “‘Real’ Men, Naked Women and the Politics of Paradise” 155-162). Ahmed in her article actually questions the attempt to slot Lalla as exclusively Hindu or Muslim.

138 The invocation of the purusharthas at the beginning, while formally subordinating kama to dharma, actually legitimises Vatsyayana’s secular language and approach, since by its own determinations kama and artha are meant to be aesthetic and political, earthy and secular pursuits of life.
group nature of its *chakra-puja*\(^{139}\) as well as other ritual practices, no doubt, give it a bacchanalian colouring, making it vulnerable both to such charges and/or its nefarious misuse. But as a matter of fact, the Tantras, all, are not even convinced about the merits of orgasmic ejaculation. As Georg Feuerstein notes, “*[t]he preservation of semen and the energy for which it stands is an important aspect of Tantra*” (237) so that loss of seminal fluids is often considered vitally enervating. Rather than ejaculation, thus, all efforts are often geared towards the retention and/or reversal of the seminal flow. That is to say, a transformation of the gross body into, what can be called, after Gordon White, “the alchemical body,” to yield spiritual power.\(^{140}\) An endeavour fitting enough, one might add, for the votaries of Shiva, the *tapasvi* with his ever-erect lingam! But this inventory of differences should not be misconstrued as a complete denial of similarities for ultimately both the *Kamasutra* and the Tantras evince an affirmative understanding of desire and sexuality, the former as pleasure and the latter as power. They are likewise positive about matters corporeal, and, refreshingly, do not consider women to be either preternaturally and/or unilaterally evil. Neither do they require men to shun female society. One might be tempted to say, quite the opposite, rather. And if that is not enough, both also seem to recognise the phenomenon of *viparita rati*: the *Kamasutra* extends only a conditional and occasional legitimacy to the “woman on top,” very specifically limited to the duration of particular sexual encounters and because its unconventionality might add to sexual pleasure (principally it believes the man to be the active agent and

\(^{139}\) For a brief description of *chakra-puja* as well as the different types of it and the different powers that they yield, refer to Feuerstein (241-48) and Bose and Haldar (103-108).

\(^{140}\) This is not simply wordplay, of course. Feuerstein mentions how “Tantric scriptures ... speak of the conversion of semen into *ojas*, which is essential food for the spiritual process. Orgasm is thought to waste not only semen but also deplete the store of *ojas* and thus negate the possibility of spiritual growth...” Further explaining the importance of *ojas* within Tantric paradigms, he writes, “*The term *ojas*... is derived from the verbal root *vaj*, meaning ‘to be strong’ and denoting ‘strength’ or ‘vitality.’ It manifests in the body as *virya*, or ‘virility,’ which word is related to *vira*, the Tantric hero.... for the *yogins* it is a subtle substance or force. They regard it as being distributed over the entire body and to be especially concentrated in semen. It is the most subtle form of the life force (*prana*) sustaining body and mind, and being the energetic motor behind inner growth and the transcendence of the ego-personality (*jiva*)” (237).
the woman to be the passive locus); Tantra (Hindu),\textsuperscript{141} however, is vitally premised on the understanding of the feminine Shakti as the dynamic/active principle of \textit{rta} and Shiva, the masculine principle as cosmic quiescence (iconographic representations of their union generally show a rampant Shakti bestride a recumbent Shiva).

Taking off from this last point, Tantra as the self-proclaimed religion par excellence for the Kali Yuga with its predilection for the unconventional, the marginal and outcaste, should ideally offer women a sympathetic religious haven. Not surprisingly, the nature and scope of feminine agency in Tantric traditions has attracted some attention and considerable debate. But once again, both no-holds-barred affirmations as well as out of hand dismissals seem to be simplistic resolutions of the complex tantra of convictions. Not least because of the presence of many kinds of Tantra, all subtly differentiated, yet linked. For instance, some Tantras have Shiva as the original Tantric preceptor initiating Parvati, his wife and disciple, into the mystical Truth of Tantricism. And despite acknowledging the necessary and potent dynamism of Shakti their desire is to realise oneness as Parama Shiva. In stark contrast, Shakta strains swear by the primacy and supremacy of the Devi, Adya Shakti, as compared to the masculine principle. Indeed in her manifestation as the Dasa Mahavidyas, the masculine principle is more \textit{shava} than Shiva and the Devi is worshipped as all in all. Such beliefs along with the widespread acknowledgement of the importance of the feminine principle across the broad spectrum of Tantric practices,\textsuperscript{142} the worship

\textsuperscript{141} In Buddhist Tantra, the feminine principle, \textit{prajna} is quiescent and the masculine \textit{upaya}, active.

\textsuperscript{142} Refer, for instance, to Madhu Khanna’s “The Goddess-Woman Equation in Sakta Tantras” that describes, among other things, three common types of \textit{puja} in which women receive the ritual worship, viz., \textit{kumari-puja} “where young virgins or ‘chaste,’ premenstrual girls receive worship,” \textit{suvasini-puja} where “married and unmarried women are worshipped by their husbands or Shaktas devotees as living incarnations of Tripurasundari or Lalita” and \textit{shakti-puja} involving the “sex-yogic ritual of union, observed by an extreme Kaula sect... [where] the physical woman is looked upon as the human incarnation of the goddess on the earthly plane” (51-52). Similarly, David Kinsley mentions the \textit{Yogini-tantra} according to which “yoni \textit{puja}, worship of the vulva, is the best of all methods of worship. The \textit{Kamakhyo-tantra} instructs the \textit{sadhaka} to worship the goddess in the genitals of his sakti. The \textit{Maya-tantra} enjoins the adept to imagine his chosen deity residing in the yoni of a woman ‘who is not his own’ in order to obtain perfection. The \textit{Sarvollasa-}
of the yoni along with the linga, the mystical strength attributed to the yoni-tattva and menstrual blood, as well as the generally positive attitude towards women as incarnation of the divine Shakti and even an acceptance of them as adepts should all argue for Tantra, certain forms of it most unequivocally, but even others, more conditionally perhaps, as the most woman-friendly of religio-spiritual traditions.

It probably is not unfair to grant as much too, at least conceptually, but at the same time it must be admitted that this owes equally to the androcentrism and misogyny of most institutionalised religions as to Tantra’s gynergetic pronouncements. For Tantra is not without its potentially and practically disconcerting features for women. As a case in point, in the ritual practice of Tantric coitus there seems to be a general asymmetry of knowledge-power. The adept seems to ritually couple with an ingénue. And if the adept happens to be

*tantra* of Sarvananda, citing the *Vrhad-yoni-tantra*, discusses the downward pointing triangle, the symbol of the yoni, as containing Brahma, Visnu, and Siva on its three sides, and also most of the Mahavidyas...” (*Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine* 248).

143 According to Madhu Khanna,

> Women have the authority to become priestesses and gurus, initiate disciples, run their own respective asramas and hold positions of power in the religious sphere. The texts claim that females are the purest source of transmission of sacred revelation. Knowledge of the Tantras must be passed on through *yoginimukha* or the lips of the self-realized female *yoginis* and spiritually accomplished women... the *Kaulajnana Nirnaya* speaks of the *yogini* Kaula sect. This text embodies a tradition transmitted orally by a line of female ascetics who were accomplished (*siddha*) in *Kaula-Sadhana*... We also know that the first recipients of the Tantric wisdom in the Krama sect were the Tantric ascetics who also received the knowledge from the “lips of the *yoginis*” (*Yoginivaktra sambhuta*)... (“The Goddess-Woman Equation in Sakta Tantras” 53)

Most famously, in modern times, there is the Bhairavi who is supposed to have initiated Ramakrishna into Tantric practice. Madhu Khanna speaks of her encounter with Madhobi Ma, “a twentieth century Tantric saint” (“Parallel Worlds of Madhobi Ma, ‘Nectar Mother’” 136). B. Bhattacharya in his *The World of Tantra* speaks of his *guru*, the Lady in Saffron, a coconut vendor in Varanasi and other practicing *bhairavis*. Refer also to Nilima Chitgopekar’s “The Unfettered *Yoginis*” for a brief clarification of “the *locus standi* of the *Yoginis* within Hinduism” (83).

144 Different scholars have noted the Tantric injunctions to couple with specific classes of lower caste women such as “dancing girls, Kapalikas ... prostitutes and women of the barber, washerman and cowherd castes” (Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine* 247). Usually this is taken as evidence of the radical inclusiveness of the Tantric creed in which “[e]ven widows, low-caste women and prostitutes are worthy of respect” (Khanna, “The Goddess-Woman Equation in Sakta Tantra” 46). Feuerstein’s reference to the stipulations of the *Mahacina-Acara-Krama-*
male and his partner female, as is often the case, then the intercourse might be termed as an aware Tantric “twinning” with a shakti unaware of her Shakti. Is this the male upaya “taking” the female prajna ignorant of her wisdom for his own greater self-realisation? Then again some kinds of ritual maithuna require first the generation of the yoni-tattva in the coital act and then its suction upwards by the male partner along with his own semen through the practice of the Hathayogic vajroli mudra. Needless to say, the suggestion of the practical instrumentality of women, the conceptual parasitism on the feminine principle and/or the principle of assimilationism contained here are all deeply disturbing. Indeed, the ritual incorporation of women/gynergy/yoni-tattva by their male/masculine

_Tantra_, however, provides a clue for another possible explanation for such preferences. He says the text requires that “the female partner should be a lovely young woman, free from shyness, recruited from the ranks of actresses, prostitutes, washerwomen, shepherdesses, hairdressers, or from other members of the _shudra_ state, but also _brahmin_ women, if available” (247). To my mind, that last qualification, points to the very real possibility that the Tantric preference for lower caste women could also be a matter of plain pragmatics—the dearth of brahmin women willing to participate in Tantric rites and the greater “availability” of lower caste women who were, in any case, by traditional writ deemed to be “available” to a variety of higher caste male attentions.

145 Mind you, in the Tantric world, the guru can also be the sadhaka’s upaya for spiritual progress, as maybe inferred from the word, gurupaya. So it’s not to say the word itself establishes nefarious intent among the Tantriks. However, with the guru, the sadhaka can never dominate and direct the proceedings without the willing consent of the former. With a novice partner, no matter how much the sadhaka may divinise the person, the possibility for foul play, for selfishly manipulating and deeply harming the partner, psychologically and/or physically, not to mention, spiritually, remains. At the more apparent physical and psychological levels, this is especially so since various dangerous metallic substances as well as mind-altering narcotics are or may be a part of the maithuna rituals. In fact, for a chilling account of a “seance” gone wrong and its deadly consequences for the unsuspecting, immature or misguided partner, refer to Bhattacharya’s _The World of Tantra_ (169-75). At the end, describing the unfortunate partner’s condition, he writes:

Years after I have watched that woman strolling on the streets of Varanasi as a poor insane lost being. The sore on her buttock [from a wound inflicted on her with a trident by the enraged sadhak] never healed. The mercury in the vermillion must have spread all over her skin. The sores on the skin, specially the condition of the tender flesh on her back and the breasts, made her completely forbidding to touch. Always bothered and pestered by hungry swarms of flies she remained an object of pity and scornful derision for the indifferent streams of onlookers that passed her, until one morning her lifeless body was found by the river side. (174-75)

146 The Upanishadic passages quoted earlier (n130) provide an analogous understanding where “informed” sex, fully aware of its metaphysical charge results in the merits of the woman accruing to the man. This is considered legitimate, as it should be, but if the man is ignorant of the ritualistic significance of sexual intercourse then his merits are annexed to the woman’s share. This is considered illegitimate, thus providing one of the early examples of linkages between male power, knowledge, legitimacy and female power, ignorance and illegitimacy—a common feature of patriarchal social organisation.
counterparts even finds an iconographic figuration in the androgynous manifestation of Shiva as the Ardhanarishvara, synthesising, as it were, the cosmic dialectic through the incorporation of the feminine.\textsuperscript{147} If these worries are specific to certain forms of Tantra, what is perhaps more common, is the Tantric vaunt of being able to bring others under one's personal sway, especially women for purposes of \textit{maithuna}. True, texts like the \textit{Kula Arnava Tantra} say that the “One who ... commits forcible intercourse goes to the raurava hell” (5.99.111; as trans. in Feuerstein 232). But “there are also texts that describe magical means of subjugating a woman” (247). Indeed, even a text like the Shakta \textit{Saundaryalahari} recognises such Tantric powers and its exercise as nothing surprising or reprehensible:

Many celestial damsels like Urvashi, their eyes trembling and beautiful like those of the forest does, fall under the spell of one who meditates on you bathing the heaven and earth in crimson glory, by the rays of your body, resembling the crimson rays of the rising sun.

O! Queen of the Destroyer, That he who can meditate on your \textit{Kamakala} treating your face as a point, below that the pair of your breasts, and further below the womb can forthwith captivate women is an easy trifle, for such a one can quickly conquer the three worlds, whose breasts are as it were the sun and the moon. \textit{(Saundaryalahari of Shankaracarya 11; verses 18-19)}

Finally, most Tantric texts seem to speak from the male adept’s point of view, articulate and answer to his aspirations and inscribe his experiences—the above-stated text being a case in point. And perhaps not unrelatedly, most extant Tantric texts also seem to have been authored by men.\textsuperscript{148} While this does not, necessarily,

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\textsuperscript{147} Interestingly, the traditional Hindu marriage implies a symbolic incorporation of the wife by the husband; she is known thenceforward as his \textit{ardhangini}. The corresponding lack of a gynandrous equivalent in both the Tantric as well as the Hindu conjugal paradigm, I think tells its own story. Perhaps the cause of most cosmic and marital strife is plain and simple indigestion!

\textsuperscript{148} Admitting the possibility of the thesis advanced by Miranda Shaw vis-à-vis Buddhist Tantrism, “that the ‘male gaze’ and male spirituality generally, might be understood to reflect female experience as well, insofar as women teach, fully participate in rituals with males, and sometimes write tantric texts,” David Kinsley writes, “The same may be the case in Hindu Tantrism and in Mahavidya worship specifically. While men wrote the great majority of tantric texts, it is possible that women wrote some of them, since they were sometimes teachers. It is also possible, as Shaw has argued for Buddhist Tantra, that male spirituality as reflected in texts written by males, might be informed by female religious experience, especially in cases where both sexes were full participants in tantric rites. Thus far, however, I have been unable to find Hindu tantric texts that explicitly discuss or describe tantric rites from a female point of view. During my research I asked scholars and informants if they knew of any materials on the Mahavidyas, or any Hindu tantric materials, that were written by, for or about females. No one did...” \textit{(Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine 250)}. 88
rule out either female participation and/or spiritual mastery, it definitely throws into relief the imbalance between the conceptual indispensability of the feminine and the practical marginality, and instrumentality, even eventual expendability of women in Tantric paradigms.  

Desire as Male/Masculine

"In the beginning is desire"—this is the more recent and Tantric spin on one of the earliest extant musings on the unfathomable origins of creation in the "Nasadiya Sukta" of the Rig Veda. Richly paradoxical and allusive, this short hymn holds that:

Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning; with no distinguishing sign, all this was water. The life force that was covered with emptiness, that one arose through the power of heat.
Desire came upon that one in the beginning, that was the first seed of the mind. Poets seeking in their heart with wisdom found the bond of existence in non-existence. (O'Flaherty 25; RV 10.129.3-4)

I find these verses useful here for two reasons. For starters, they express an awareness of the primal coincidence of desire, life-force and inner heat, if not their identity, in the original process of coming into being. In any case, they prefigure the complex relationship between desire, creation and tapas, whether understood affirmatively through conflation, ambivalently through equivocation

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149 Indeed, according to Feuerstein, "it looks increasingly likely that the main initiators into the esoteric world of Tantra were originally not male but female adepts..." (226). And Nilima Chitgopekar cites both N. N. Bhattacharya and Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya as arguing that, "Tantrism was originally the exclusive affair of women" (88).

150 Bhakti offers a curious contrast here. While the theology of Bhakti predominantly subordinates the feminine to the masculine, the practice of Bhakti has seen a more robust female participation, with many extant texts as well as well developed hagiographies. One reason for this could be that the Bhakti creed and credos seem less obviously threatening of social ideals of femininity while Tantric practices demand a radical discipline that flies in the face of all sorts of conventional pieties. I am, of course, being idly speculative here. Frankly, the reasons, for this intriguing phenomenon, including its veracity, could do with some serious study.

151 This is the title and the assertion of Neela Bhattacharya Saxena's book reviewed earlier.

152 This hymn need not only be taken to imply that "in the beginning there is desire." It could just as well be saying that in the beginning there was the "The life force that was covered with emptiness." [7]hat one [the life force, that is] arose through the power of heat." And "Desire came upon that one [the life force] in the beginning..." Thus desire need not necessarily be coincident with the life force but could be subsequent and necessary to it in ways that are crucial to itself and creation.
and/or negatively through antithesis, that is to be found in most Indian philosophico-spiritual delineations of desire. And second, it gives me a convenient point of departure for this section—a section which explores how “that one[’s]” desire or desire as “that one” is oftentimes differently conceived and valenced in Indian thought-systems as male/masculine.

What exactly does it mean though to understand desire as male/masculine? It could mean a variety of things depending most obviously on the specificities of its articulation as well as the horizons of its interpretation. This, of course, throws the field of its legitimate meaning wide open, rendering it in the process perhaps slightly disorienting and heuristically lax. I hope to avoid this by delimiting my meaning of this equation here to a set of three broad possibilities. These are:

- The embodiment of desire as male.
- The attribution of conventionally deemed masculine characteristics, experiences and aspirations to desire.
- And finally, the understanding of desire as something that is primarily related to, and of vital concern for men. The relation is understood in one of two decisive ways: either the man is in control and is the master of his desires or he is controlled and mastered by it. The first is the healthy or dharmic state of affairs, the second its opposite.

It goes without saying that these postulates are not mutually exclusive. In fact different examples are quite as likely to show how they interface, overlap, gird and melt into one another.

I’ll begin with the first assumption, i.e., desire as embodied male. In Hindu mythology Kama or desire is fleshed out as the god of love. His genealogy variously boasts of Lakshmi and Vishnu (Harivamsha), Brahma (Shiva Purana) or Shraddha (Faith) and Dharma (Vishnu Purana) as parents. He joins with Rati and Priti for his conjugal sports, has Vasant (Spring) as his travelling companion 153

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153 Though the figure of Kama can be traced back to the Atharvaveda, and appears in the epic Mahabharata, the Kamadeva, I focus upon is the one found in the later Puranic literature. For a listing of some of his many names, that are descriptive of role and function, refer to entry “3” under “Kama” in Frederic W. Bunce’s An Encyclopaedia of Hindu Deities, Deities, Demi-Gods, Godlings, Demons and Heroes (249). I mention here only a couple of the names listed that establish his hierarchical relationship to Rati, i.e., Ratipati and Ratinayaka.
and a troop of Maras to do his bidding.\textsuperscript{154} Like his Western counterpart, Cupid, Kamadeva is considered to be a handsome youth suitably tricked out with a sugarcane bow strung with honeybees. His quiver, full of flower-tipped arrows that are famed to arouse the senses where they strike, completes his armoury of love. Of course he’s also known to be a sure shot. The parrot or the cuckoo serves as his trademark carrier. And as for the legends of his amorous exploits, these are legion. According to one such telling, Kamadeva at the behest of gods beleaguered by the demon Taraka is encouraged to aim his potent arrows of love at a Shiva immersed in ascetic yoga. Disturbed in his meditations, Shiva is enraged by the temerity of Kama. As a result, he opens his dreaded third eye directly reducing Kama to ashes by the fury of his gaze. Later, Shiva relents and restores him to life but only as an abstraction so that an incorporeal Kama from then on is also known as Ananga. As an aside, let it be mentioned that Kama’s arrows had not struck in vain. Shiva was suitably smitten by the charms of Parvati. He not only married her but also engaged with her in those legendary episodes of millennial sex!\textsuperscript{155}

Even this sparse description suffices to impress one with the realisation that though embodied male, this gendered mythological resolution of desire is neither simplistic nor unaware of the faultlines that traditionally cleave the thinking on desire. Rather what you have is a characterisation of desire that is shot through with ambivalence, in which both the nature of desire as well as the extent of its powers seems to belie easy categorisation. Thus, for instance, Kama is not just male he is also Ananga. He is both of the flesh and of the mind. Through his marriage to Rati (sexual passion and/or intercourse) and Priti (pleasure) he is closely bonded to matters sexual and pleasurable, but as a husband, it is also conventionally understood that while he subsumes the identity of his wives, he is

\textsuperscript{154} In fact, in Buddhist tellings Kama himself is recalled as Mara, death, the supreme tempter, with his three daughters Tanha, Arati and Raga.

\textsuperscript{155} For an interesting collection and study of Kama’s mythology, refer to Catherine Benton’s \textit{God of Desire}. For more details of the Taraka legend, refer to Benton (41).
not necessarily limited or defined by it. Interestingly, though he is a god and even acknowledged to be the son of gods, he is not among the A-listers in the roster of divinity.\footnote{Though his worship is not very common, for the kinds of rituals Kamadeva is invoked in, refer to Benton (95-102).} However, he is clearly commissioned by the Gods to render them useful service.\footnote{The nature of services rendered are sometimes decidedly dubious. For instance, Kama is often invoked to strike opportunely at maidens to fulfil the momentary lusts of various devas. Similarly, he is conscripted to help shatter the tapasya of ascetics who the gods feel could be threatening to them.} In fact, in the above-stated instance, Kama’s services are absolutely imperative for the restoration of the cosmic and moral order, the rta, confounded by Taraka’s demonic excesses.\footnote{Legend has it that Kama was required to awaken desire in the ascetic Shiva since it was only Shiva’s progeny (Skanda) that could save the world. Harsha V. Dehejia in his Parvatidarpana provides an interesting gloss on this assignment to Kamadeva “… the desire for self-awareness cannot be solipsistic and can only be fulfilled only when there is the fervent iccha or desire for objective cognition. It is for this reason that Kama was deputed to discharge his arrow, for without the desire Siva would have remained in his solipsistic and unfruitful contemplation. For in the desireless and passive state, Siva’s consciousness is involuted as in a peacock’s egg, unable to expand…” (43 as ctd. in Saxena 115).} Kama, in other words, is intrinsically and extrinsically ambivalent. He belongs to the liminal realm between the sacred and the profane, the moral and the immoral, the physical and the mental, and finally between cupidity and agape. Neither is the ambivalence restricted to the person, persona and deeds of Kamadeva. If anything, it emerges even more vividly in the figure of Shiva—the yogi par excellence who is not only struck by desire but who also destroys Kama and thereafter restores him. Incidentally, his ascetic tapasya, which generates the inner heat that incinerates Kama, is also the source of his extraordinary sexual appetite and endurance—in other words, the source of Kama!

With regard to the second equation, frankly any number of instances can be adduced to substantiate it. The treasure trove of Indian myth, literature and philosophy is quite full to overflowing in riches of the kind. It is difficult to choose from this cornucopia but I pick up two nuggets of thought found in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad as suitable illustration. My choice is directed by the fact that the Upanishads as self-conscious meditations on an un-gendered reality,
by their slippage into gendered ways, highlight all the more effectively how “natural” it is to think masculine when thinking desire.

According to one of the creation myths:

In the beginning this world was just a single body (atman) shaped like a man.... he found no pleasure at all; so one finds no pleasure when one is alone. He wanted to have a companion. Now he was as large as a man and a woman in close embrace. So he split (pat) his body into two, giving rise to husband (pati) and wife (patni).... He copulated with her, and from their union human beings were born. She then thought to herself: “After begetting me from his own body (atman), how could he copulate with me? I know—I’ll hide myself.” So she became a cow. But he became a bull and copulated with her. From their union cattle was born. Then she became a mare and he a stallion; she became a female donkey, and he, a male donkey. And again he copulated with her, and from their union one-hoofed animals were born. Then she became a female goat, and he, a male goat; she became a ewe, and he, a ram. And again he copulated with her, and from their union goats and sheep were born. In this way he created every male and female pair that exists down to the very ants.... (Olivelle 13-14; BU 1.4.1-4)

Recounting another variation on the theme of creation, the same Upanishad contends:

In the beginning this world was only one self (atman), only one. He had this desire; ‘I wish I had a wife so I could father offspring. I wish I had wealth so I could perform rites.’ That is the full extent of desire; one does not get anything more, even if one desires it.... As long as someone has not obtained either of these, he considers himself to be utterly incomplete. Now, this is his completeness—his mind is himself (atman); his speech is his wife; his breath is his offspring; his sight is his human wealth.... (Olivelle 17; BU 1.4.17)

What I find interesting about these examples, apart from the obvious attribution of identifiably masculine aspirations and agency to desire, is how their juxtaposition highlights the different motives ascribed to primal desire. In the first case, we are told in no uncertain terms that pleasure is the chief objective. The original being finds itself alone, and so, bereft of pleasure. It promptly splits itself for the pleasure of companionship. The creation, read procreation, that happens is merely a by-product of the pleasure realised in heterosexual coupling. As against this the second example offers a neat volte-face. Atman, desire, pleasure, creation, man, woman, child, all, are there but the order in which they relate to each other is significantly altered. Instead of pleasure, progeny and sacred rites engross the sum total of all desires. Thus desire is a desire for pro/creation and its maintenance through ritualistic observance/performance. Pleasure is something that would
naturally come, of course, with the fulfillment of these desires but it is not in itself to be confused with the chief motive of desire.

Coming to the third and final assumption, some of the juridical exhortations and injunctions of the manavadharmashastra, succinctly manifest the contradictory pulls that underwrite such antagonistic relations between desire and man. According to the Manusmriti:

Acting out of desire is not approved of, but here on earth there is no such thing as no desire; for even studying the Veda and engaging in the rituals enjoined in the Veda are based upon desire. Desire is the very root of the conception of a definite intention; all the vows and the duties of restrictions are traditionally said to come from the conception of a definite intention. Not a single rite is ever performed here on earth by a man without desire; for each and every thing that he does is motivated by the desire for precisely that thing. The man who is properly occupied in these (desires) goes to the world of the immortals, and here on earth he achieves all the desires for which he has conceived an intention. (Doniger and Smith 17; MS 2.2-5)

A little later, the text holds:

A learned man should keep trying hard to restrain his sensory powers as they run amok among alluring sensory objects, like a charioteer (restraining) his race-horses. I will explain, thoroughly and in order, the eleven sensory powers that wise men of ancient times spoke of: the ear, the skin, the eyes, the tongue, and the nose as the fifth; the anus, the genitals, the hand and foot, (and the organ) of speech is traditionally regarded as the tenth, the five beginning with the ear are the senses; the five beginning with the anus are the motor-powers. The eleventh is known as the mind-and-heart, which belongs to both (sets) by virtue of its own qualities; when it has been conquered, both of these sets of five have been conquered. Through the addiction of his sensory powers, a man certainly makes mistakes, but if he firmly restrains them all, he will achieve success. Desire is never extinguished by the enjoyment of what is desired; it just grows stronger, like a fire that flares up with the oblation (of butter) and burns a dark path.

Someone may attain all of these (desires) and someone may reject them all, but the rejection of all desires is better than the attainment. Those (sensory powers) that take voluptuous pleasure in the sensory objects cannot be restrained by non-indulgence so well as by constant understanding. The Vedas, rejection (of desires), sacrifices, restraints, the generation of inner heat—they never bring perfect success to a man whose nature has been corrupted. A man who neither thrills nor recoils when he hears, touches, sees, tastes, or smells anything—he should be known as a man who has conquered his sensory powers. But if a single one of all the sensory powers slips away, through that his wits slip away.… If he keeps the whole cluster of sensory powers in control, and his mind-and-heart as well, he may achieve success in all his goals, without wasting away his body through harnessing (his energies). (Doniger and Smith 27-28; MS 2.88-100)

Of course, one of the most important ways of keeping the senses in check is by avoiding the corrupting influence of women. As if to impress upon men both the unregenerate nature of women and the enormity of the threat that they constitute to male self-control, the Manusmriti even offers an intimate peep into the innately
prurient workings of the female psyche, asserting all the while that “Good looks do not matter to them, nor do they care about youth; ‘A man!’ they say, and enjoy sex with him, whether he is good-looking or ugly” (Doniger and Smith 198; MS 9.14).

To say that this text looks on “desire as a necessary evil” should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with its strictures. I would further contend that even this “necessity” of desire is only in deference to the continuous parampara of thought to which the text owes allegiance; as an acknowledgment of the holistic penchant it claims as its philosophico-spiritual heritage and which, most importantly, authorises it.\(^{159}\) Result? The Manusmriti is faced with the difficult task of reconciling its aversion for the idea of desire with an acknowledgement of its pervasive reality in every aspect of this life. Quite in consonance with the best of paramparic resolutions, the Manusmriti resorts to the strategies of qualification and codification to help achieve its purpose. It acknowledges the impetus of desire in the first instance of Action/Life/Intention but questions a necessary like presence in its subsequent or last instance. In this way, it is able to argue for the legitimacy of a nishkama or non-desiring life while simultaneously recognising the initially inescapable reality of desire. It furthermore, emphasises “restraint” born of “constant understanding” rather than a repressive and uninformed “non-indulgence” as the more effective way of overpowering desires. In other words, it advocates a method of carefully monitoring desires out of existence without a concomitant renunciation of society by a strict adherence to the dharmic life. And hence, of course, its considerable labours towards the elucidation/enumeration of the manavadharmashastra!

\(^{159}\) Of course, to be holistic is not the same as to be just. Philosophically holism means “the theory that certain wholes are to be regarded as greater than the sum of their parts.” More commonly, it implies a worldview that is not exclusive per se. Thus to point to its internal stratifications as a critique of holism is neither here nor there since the word never sets out to deny it in the first place. Having said that for those variously oppressed/marginalised by certain holistic worldviews it is imperative to actively engage/interrogate/redraft the “hows” and “wheres” of their inclusion in these social orders and/or supplant them with more favourable/equitable/humane alternatives.
Quite clearly all of the above instances, belonging to different periods in history, and occurring in different types of texts, understand desire to be male, masculine or at the very least primarily concerning men. Quite clearly also, these are assumptions variously uncertain about the exact relationship between desire, pleasure, sexuality, creation, inner heat, etc. What follows is a brief speculation on the possible implications of each of this type of uncertain “manomania” for the negotiations of gender relations.

The most obvious and deleterious result of understanding desire in terms of a holistic androcentricism is the often unstated but inevitable marginalisation of female subjectivity that goes along with it. Of course, the extent and manner of exclusion from centrality varies but the marginalisation itself remains a constant. For instance, when desire is embodied male in the Puranic lore about Kamadeva, it does not mean that women cannot experience desire. Kama, at least in this regard, is just, and like justice fairly blind. But since in this paradigm Kamadeva is in charge of all the vibes of desire in the world it does mean that female desire can only come into being through, and as a consequence of, male initiation. In

160 Briefly, the Upanishadic myths predate the others by centuries; they belong to what is known as shruti knowledge, thus having the highest authority within traditional estimations; the forest-dwelling rishi is their main subject. The Manusmriti belongs to the shastraic tradition of codification and as smriti knowledge it is also authoritative but yields place to shruti; it roughly dates to the first century of the Common Era; it takes the brahmin (male) householder as its ideal subject. The Puranic legends come a few centuries later. They are supposed to be eighteen in number though this is more a conventional than an accurate figure. They have gods and semi-divine characters as their subject and are traditionally supposed to exhibit the panchalakshana: “sarga (creation or evolution of the universe), pratisarga (re-creation of the universe after its periodic dissolution), vamsa (genealogies of gods, patriarchs, sages and kings), manvantara (‘Manu-intervals,’ cosmic cycles, each of which is presided over by a Manu, the father of mankind), vamsanucharita (accounts of royal dynasties)” (Coburn, Devi Mahatmya 21). Their function is to show the way, especially to those sections of the populace barred from direct Vedic study, i.e., women and shudras. They also belong to the smriti category of knowledge. For more details, refer to Coburn’s text cited above (19-50).

161 Mind you, I am not saying that the type of male/masculine desire identified here is exclusive to the text and its tradition (for instance, desire as male in Puranic literature and masculine in Upanishadic, etc). What I identify are simply three ways, or more correctly, three types of ways in which desire appears as male/masculine in pre-modern India. The examples given are only indicative, not representative or exhaustive. As for how they function vis-à-vis each other, I believe each type reinforces the others in many ways, drawing on a shared cultural ethos to self-legitimise. However, in other ways, they also critically conflict with each other and therefore can be used to undercut one another.
other words, any possibility of an autochthonous female desire is discounted to the extent that it is etiologically linked to masculine direction.\textsuperscript{162}

The second assumption goes beyond this male incarnation and overlord-ship of desire; and its implications for the possible expression of female desire are, if anything, grimmer. Within its parameters, desire is naturally and essentially identified as a masculine phenomenon. As such, it is only logical that desire should be understood in terms of masculine aspirations, experience and agency. Needless to say, this exclusive focus annuls even the mediated forms of desire allowed to women by the earlier delineation. Both the Upanishadic examples quoted above illustrate this expropriation of female/feminine desire in different ways. For instance, one myth sublates all desires to the double desire of progeny and performance of prescribed rites via the instrumentality of wife and wealth, respectively. The phrasing of this desire leaves very little doubt as to the gendered identity of the subject that speaks it. And when coupled with the subsequent assertion that this “is the full extent of desire,” it effectively shuts out any possibility of articulating an Other/s desire. The other creation myth embeds a similarly one-sided vision of desire. According to it the primal being\textsuperscript{163} originally splits into two prototypes—one man-shaped and the other woman-shaped. Significantly the man-shaped entity immediately feels desire and strives for its satisfaction by actively seeking out and coupling with the other (woman). The woman-shaped being, on the other hand, feels only shame and acts on this by

\textsuperscript{162} Perhaps it is no coincidence that Kamadeva is Lord of the \textit{apsaras}. These celestial nymphs and their seductive charms are very much subject to the power, pleasure and determination of various male divinities.

\textsuperscript{163} Bimal Krishna Matilal points out that “According to Samkara, ‘He’ [the primal being in the telling concerned] refers to Manu or Viraja, and the woman was his daughter, Satarupa whom he conceived of as his mate. From their union, human beings were born” (“Love and Sensuality in the Epics” 146). I believe this characterisation only confirms my point—that desire and creation as conceived here is primarily male/masculine. Manu also talks of a male Viraj (Doniger and Smith 7; MS 1.32). Just for the record, though, and because it alerts to the possibility of other interpretations to the ones proffered, Frederick M. Smith mentions how the Rig Vedic Viraj is a sexually undefined being and interestingly, “emerges in the \textit{Atharvaveda} as the first female creatrix” (“Indra’s Curse, Varuna’s Noose” 29). According to the footnote to the text, the relevant verses in the \textit{Atharvaveda} are cited as AV 8.10.24 and 11.8.30.
trying to hide herself from the gaze and reach of the other (man). Such a characterisation simultaneously masculinises desire and feminises shame/modesty. It also allows for creation itself to be understood as a consequence of male desire, the object of which is heterosexual coupling. What might make this desire particularly unsavoury for women is its self-serving rapacity: it demands satiation even if this entails the repeated subjection of females to, what must in the last instance be admitted to being forced and/or non-consensual sexual intercourse. Thus this myth not only excludes female desire; it equally and more disconcertingly disregards female consent. It both sanctions male sexual violence and erases female distress by naturalising them as specific and essential to each type and to the creative process as a whole. In other words, it is suggestive of gender relations normatively based on male desire, agency and mastery on the one hand, and female modesty, helplessness and submission, on the other.

The third assumption with its emphasis on the relations of desire to men once again recognises only one legitimate subject position in terms of gender, i.e., male/masculine. But as evidenced in the Manusmriti, its understanding of desire is more textured. For one, it recognises that desire is initially all-pervasive. As such, by the logic of its own delineation, it is forced to admit that both men and women feel desire. At the same time, since, according to it, desire is far from being all good and regularly threatens to run away with one’s senses, it is also deemed essential for men to exert a measure of control over it. To be successful in this endeavour, however, requires the prior identification of desire. And it is to this end that the Manusmriti sedulously identifies, enumerates and locates desire within the complex of the sensory/sensual. But this is not entirely satisfactory since it is too nebulous, too diffuse, a notion to grasp and subjugate and as such a source of constant anxiety for the conscientious man and the Brahminical

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164 She also significantly believes that the man-shaped being and the original being are one and the same, as maybe inferred from her thought, “After begetting me from his own body (atman), how could he copulate with me?”

165 Interestingly, it is the female’s modesty and her resolution to hide from the male in the guise of different species of animals that accounts for the infinite variety of creation.
patriarchal social order in general. So what does the Manusmriti do? It strategically argues for a sort of gender specialisation of desire. All of the most pernicious, immoral, and corrupting of human desires are conveniently projected onto, and become objectified in, the gross person of women. This projection through a characteristic patriarchal slippage is however understood to be the innate svabhava of women, to guard against, and control, which, becomes a task morally incumbent on the vigilant man and society alike. As the Manusmriti says:

It is the very nature of women to corrupt men here on earth; for that reason, circumspect men do not get careless and wanton among wanton women. It is not just an ignorant man, but even a learned man of the world, too, that a wanton woman can lead astray when he is in the control of lust and anger. No one should sit with his mother, sister, or daughter; for the strong cluster of the sensory powers drags away even a learned man. (Doniger and Smith 38-39; MS 2.213-15)

By running after men like whores, by their fickle minds, and by their natural lack of affection these women are unfaithful to their husbands even when they are zealously guarded here. Knowing that their very own nature is like this, as it was born at the creation by the Lord of Creatures, a man should make the utmost effort to guard them. The bed and the seat, jewellery, lust, anger, crookedness, a malicious nature, and bad conduct are what Manu assigned to women. There is no ritual with Vedic verses for women; this is a firmly established point of law. For women, who have no virile strength and no Vedic verses, are falsehood; this is well established. (Doniger and Smith 198; MS 9.15-18)

In other words, for desires to be under check and the social and moral order to prevail, it is first and foremost imperative for women to be under proper control and constant surveillance. Little wonder, Manu believed that “Men must make their women dependent day and night, and keep under their own control those who are attached to sensory objects.... A woman is not fit for independence” (Doniger and Smith 197; MS 9.2-3). Quite obviously, the gynophobic misogyny of this worldview is far from likely to encourage a mutually appreciative, cooperative and non-oppressive paradigm for the conduct of gender relations. But what is worse is that even by its own parameters, it sets up a false, self-distorting and exceptional antithesis in the lives of women—the antithesis between a subhuman svabhava and a superhuman stridharma. Since there is no possibility of an ideological rapprochement between these, women in their effort to live up to

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166 To quote Julia Leslie, “[traditionally] the inherent nature of an individual, his svabhava, is the source of his dharma, not a temptation away from it.... His svabhava is thus both his character and his duty, both what is and what is right. So why is this not true of women? Why is it consistently assumed that a woman’s svabhava will entice her away from her duty instead of reinforcing or defining it? (The Perfect Wife 264)
the rigours of *stridharma* have to either abjure their *svabhava* or expect the vicious obloquy that society never fails to heap on them for cleaving to their "natural" immorality. The sad irony of this situation, of course, is that despite having so little to do with women really, both affect women's lives in such crucial ways.\textsuperscript{167}

**Desire as Female/Feminine**

The focus here is on the different ways in which an affinity, identity or even a relation has been posited between desire and the female/feminine in the Indian cultural imaginary, more specifically, the Hindu thought-systems. This, of course, means taking cognisance not only of the "misogynist, ascetic-oriented view of the orthodox Hindu" where "Woman [is] the root of all evil" (O'Flaherty, *Hindu Myths* 36) but also a "Hinduism [that] has had popular, pervasive and longstanding Goddess traditions for many centuries ... [so that] it is not at all radical or shocking for a Hindu to say that God is a woman ..." (Erndl "Is Shakti Empowering for Women" 97). Briefly, I believe, the associations and equations formulated are many and their implications heterogeneous, yet, willy-nilly they draw upon one or the other or a combination of the conceptual triad of *Prakriti*, *Maya* and *Shakti* that has dominated cultural mappings of femaleness and femininity from antiquity.\textsuperscript{168} Here I look to their employment in two Puranic texts

\textsuperscript{167} Of course I have dwelt here only on the repressive aspects of understanding desire as variously male/masculine for women. But to be fair to them, they are also productive. For instance, they have caused "the woman under siege" to come up with a variety of coping devices ranging from cunning, deceit and manipulation vis-à-vis her desires, to hypocrisy, flattery and self-deprecation as a means of realising them; likewise, the psychological diseases spawned in women range from a deep self-hatred, unkind-ness and extreme self-denial to low self-esteem born of chronic insecurity about their own abilities.

\textsuperscript{168} For a handy study of the track of each of these concepts in Vedic, epical, philosophical, Agamic and Puranic literatures, read Tracy Pintchman's *The Rise of the Goddess in the Hindu Tradition*. Here, I would only like to say that *Prakriti* is most famously one of the two autonomous principles that make up the Samkhyan cosmogony. *Maya* finds its most popular elaboration in the philosophy of Advaita. And *Shakti* becomes a force to reckon with in Tantric and Puranic literatures devoted to the Goddess. Prior to these, *shakti* was a power belonging to the male gods either in the form of a female consort, suitably subordinated and assimilated, or as formless energy. Similarly, in Samkhyan paradigms, "liberation" meant liberation of *purusha* from the bondage of *prakriti* through right discrimination. And *maya* was the power of illusion and creation of Brahman, which unless seen through, kept the *jiva* from Self-realisation. Each of these conceptualisations, in their earlier forms, thus, subordinates the feminine (at least, grammatically
that glorify the Goddess as Creatrix. It is through a limited but focussed exploration of the *Devi Mahatmya* and the *Srimad Devi Bhagavatam* and how they use the concepts of *Maya*, *Prakriti* and *Shakti* deriving from Vedic, epic and philosophical traditions of thought, traditions of thought of which the texts themselves are a part, then, that I hope to clarify some of the more obvious ways in which desire has been understood as female/feminine in the Indian psyche. That these apprehensions are likely to be gathered round the Manichean kernel of desire as creative and desire as destructive; synthetic expressions of non-dualism; and the uncertain value of women in androcentric paradigms as necessity, comfort, bane and threat, is I think sufficiently suggested by the foregoing.

Roughly dated to the sixth century CE and a part of the *Markandeya Purana*, the *Devi Mahatmya*, also known as the *Durga* or *Chandi Saptashati*, has nonetheless flourished in its independent capacity as a devotional text. Commenting on its special place in the Indian faithscape, Thomas B. Coburn in his *Encountering the Goddess*, writes, “The *Devi Mahatmya* is not the earliest literary fragment attesting to the existence of devotion to a goddess figure, but it is surely the earliest in which the object of worship is conceptualized as Goddess with a capital G” (16). Not surprisingly, it has also served as an inspirational resource for numerous subsequent Goddess cults, sects and fraternities of worship even down to contemporary times. In other words, the *Devi Mahatmya* is not only a sedimented expression of scattered historico-cultural epiphanies of the divine feminine, but also a catalytic agent in the further spread and crystallisation of a vibrant esoteric and exoteric tradition of Goddess worship in India.

The text itself is an impassioned hymnody venerating the Devi as the divine Creatrix of all. Its devout recitation is *pari passu* a propitiation of the deity, an

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169 Refer to Coburn’s *Encountering the Goddess* and *Devi Mahatmya: The Crystallization of the Goddess Tradition*. 

if not biologically speaking) to a masculine or neutral concept. As mentioned above, my attempt is to explore how these three ideas of the feminine come together in the Devi texts and their figuration of desire.
invocation soliciting her grace and protection for the votary as well as an enlightened vision of reality meant to dispel the general condition of nescience characterising mortal life. It has potency both as mantra and artha, as word and meaning. Using the artifice of a story-within-a-story, it employs mythic narration to recount the repeated manifestation of the Devi at the behest and on behalf of a beaten and persecuted pantheon of noticeably male divinities as well as to right a cosmic order thrown off kilter by the adharmic domination of asuras (again all male). Thus the Devi Mahatmya narrates, in some detail, the Goddess’s unparalleled prowess in vanquishing Madhu and Kaitabha, Mahishasura, the Buffalo-Demon, and the brothers Shumbha and Nishumbha along with their entire demonic entourage in her three different avatars. Apart from the scenes of battle, the invocation and thanksgiving of the gods that flank them also serve as occasions for the glorification of the Goddess, so that the entire text becomes an elaborate liturgy praising the omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence of the Devi:

By her is all this universe deluded; she produces everything.
Proptitated, she grants knowledge; delighted, she bestows prosperity.

O king, this whole egg of Brahma is pervaded by her,
Who is Mahakali at the end of time, having the form of the great pestilence.
She herself is the great pestilence at one time; she herself, unborn, becomes the creation at another;
And she, the eternal, provides support for what is created at yet another time.

In times of well-being she is the good fortune of men, granting them prosperity in their homes,
In times of privation she exists as ill-fortune, for the sake of destruction.

Praised and worshipped with flowers, incense, perfumes, and the like,
She grants wealth, sons, an auspicious mind, the pathway to dharma. (12.34-38 as trans. in Coburn, Encountering the Goddess 83)

It is important to note that each of her three manifestations in the Devi Mahatmya is different in form and function. This “difference” allows for the revelation of her multifaceted, multiform svarupa and svabhava through an accretive unfolding that is both descriptive and epithetical. For instance, in the first charita she mainly facilitates Vishnu’s defeat of Madhu and Kaitabha by deluding them with her mahamaya, while in both the subsequent charitas she is the active agent of
demonic destruction, the *mahasuri*. Similarly, if in the first episode she is mainly the manifestation of an impersonal Yoganidra, in the second she is the composite amalgam of the *tejas* of various gods (Mahadevi), and in the third she emerges from Parvati’s body sheath. Then again in the first myth it is Brahma that invokes her help while in the third it is a collection of emasculated gods that call on her for succour. As for the second myth, it seems to suggest the spontaneous emergence of the Goddess due to the angry animation of the *devas*. Her manifestation here is described thus:

Having heard these words of the gods, the slayer of Madhu (Vishnu) Became angry, and Shiva too, with furrowed brows and twisted faces.

Then from Vishnu’s face, which was filled with rage, 
Came forth a great fiery splendor (*tejas*), (and also from the faces) of Brahma and Shiva.

And from the bodies of the other gods, Indra and the others, 
Came forth a great fiery splendor, and it became unified in one place.

An exceedingly fiery mass like a flaming mountain 
Did the gods see there, filling the firmament with flames.

That peerless splendor, born from the bodies of all the gods, 
Unified and pervading the triple world with its luster, became a woman. (2.8-12 as trans. in Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess* 40)

As mentioned before, thematic differences are not the only means of facilitating the diverse revelation of the Goddess. Enumerations of the various appellations ascribed to her and by which she can be invoked play an equally important role in the elaboration of the *Devi Mahatmya*. Especially since each of the epithets can serve a descriptive and/or substantive function. Quite literally, the Devi is known by her many names; she is manifest in her designations. In the *Devi Mahatmya* these are variously Chandika, Ambika, Narayani, Kali, Bhagavati, Durga, Vaishnavi, Mahamaya, Mahasuri, Nitya, Aindri, Parama, Chamunda, Shivaduti, Ishvari, Shiva, Sthita, Kaumari, Maheshvari, Brahma, Shakti, Gauri, Lakshmi, Varada, Buddhi, Lajja, Parameshvari, Sadvaha-svaha, Shri, Shraddha, Kalyani, Isha, Parvati, Prakriti, Katayani, Mahavidya-vidya, Varahi, Bhadrakali, Yoganidra-nidra, Vishnumaya, Sanatani, Mahadevi, Vishveshvari, Muktihetu, Amba, Medha-pushti-shanti-kshanti-tushti, Krishna-tamasi, Dhatri-jagaddhatri,
Narasimhi, Mahamari, among others. Each of these names reveals some aspect of hers, identifies some power of hers, signifies some function of hers.

If the *Devi Mahatmya* is a seven hundred-verse devotional tour de force that understands all reality as ultimately and ubiquitously Goddess-inspired, then the *Srimad Devi Bhagvatam* is no less. In fact, it is considerably more. This text runs to 18,000 verses, and unlike the former it is not just a part of a Purana, but a full-fledged, independent Purana in its own right dedicated to the glorification of the Devi as the highest of all reality. Dated approximately to the eleventh century CE, this text not only rehearses the myths and epithets found in the *Devi Mahatmya*, it reprises the telling by adding, contextualising, modifying, filling in the blanks, elaborating and bringing together several legends to construct an entire cosmogony centred around the Devi. I will focus here, however, on the three myths common to both texts, viz., the defeat of Madhu and Kaitabha, Mahishasura, and Shumbha and Nishumbha. The *Srimad Devi Bhagvatam*, it is true, embellishes and amends these myths but it does so in ways that only add to a multivalent understanding of desire as female/feminine.

In terms of differences between the two texts, given my narrow focus, these can be said to broadly cluster around issues of content and issues of style. With regard to the first, one of the striking twists in the storyline of the *Srimad Devi Bhagvatam* is provided by the insertion of boons. Mahishasura and the brothers Shumbha and Nishumbha, according to this telling have been granted boons by Brahma which make them invincible to any male assault. The *Srimad Devi Bhagvatam* seems to be suggesting here that it is since these boons have been

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170 Except for the addition of the name Mahasuri, I have followed Thomas B. Coburn’s inventory of the various designations of the Goddess in the *Devi Mahatmya*. For a useful study of these epithets, their antecedents and meanings, read Coburn’s chapter called “The Epithets” in his *Devi Mahatmya*.

171 In undertaking such a comparison I am not saying that the *Srimad Devi Bhagvatam* is based on the *Devi Mahatmya*, strictly speaking. The legends recounted in both the text have an ancient and diverse provenance. Yet it is undeniable that the *Devi Mahatmya* and its Goddess-centred vision was very much in circulation by the time of the composition of the later text. Refer for substantiation to Coburn’s *Devi Mahatmya*.
granted, since these demons can only be killed by females, that it is necessary for the Devi to manifest herself as a woman and intervene on behalf of the gods. Indeed, the Devi in her mocking reply to one of the asura envoys seems to say as much, “Now see that your master Mahisha has shown his intelligence, when he courted his death at the hands of a woman. For that very reason I have come here in the shape of a woman to effect my purpose” (Srimad Devi Bhagvatam 387). There is no such mention of boons to explain away the inability of the gods despite their individual and combined efforts to best the demons in the Devi Mahatmya.172 The other noticeable difference between the two texts is the length of their respective tellings. The Srimad Devi Bhagvatam provides a protracted version of the myths with several contextualising details, digressions, sub-plots, etc. The many lengthy verbal exchanges between the different demonic adversaries, their several envoys and the Devi, especially, is something that is once again not to be seen in the earlier text. Owing to this the Devi speaks a lot more in the latter text; she is able to articulate her divine views at greater length. Incidentally, these exchanges also serve as perfect occasions for sectarian asseverations on a range of theistic debates. Moving on to issues of style, the Srimad Devi Bhagvatam is much more conversational and colloquial in its use of language. It adopts a demotic style that is tailor-made for popular and public consumption. It is more narrative than verse; it is also more verbose, repetitive, and baldly moralistic than the Devi Mahatmya.

No doubt these differences are important. But more vitally pertinent to my purpose here is what the two texts in tandem might be said to reveal about the nature of the Devi, the nature of women as well as the nature of the interactions between men and women.

172 According to Cynthia Ann Humes “The Devi Bhagavata suffuses its retelling of the three major myths of the Devi Mahatmya with patriarchal values” (“Is the Devi Mahatmya a Feminist Scripture?” 139) and among other instances she cites these “boons from Brahma allowing [the demons] only to be slain by a woman” as proof of her assertion. But Humes does not seem to take into account the fact that it is the Devi herself who gives the boon to Madhu and Kaitabha in the first myth.
Broadly speaking, both texts evince an Advaitic understanding of reality with the Devi serving as the ultimate metaphysical clincher: the Goddess is the noumenal identity in/of phenomenal diversity. She is the One, the Absolute that pervades all. To quote the Goddess herself, “I alone exist here in the world; what second, other than I, is there?” (Coburn, Encountering the Goddess 71). This all-pervasive being is also manifestly female. However she is not just feminine. In other words, while she repeatedly shows herself in female form and is satisfied with being addressed as the Great Mother, she definitely exceeds the cultural expectations of what constitutes the “feminine.” For starters, the Devi is Prakriti (which is one of her names) but she is also Purusha, she is both matter and consciousness, active agency and passive witness, immanence and transcendence. Quite clearly, this is a radical (but perhaps logical) synthetic revision of the dualist ontology of Samkhya. As mentioned before, Samkhya posits two eternal, autonomous principles of being, prakriti and purusha. Prakriti is the material immanent cause of everything, while purusha is the transcendent passive witness; prakriti is agency without consciousness while purusha is consciousness without agency. Moksha, the aim of Samkhya is the realisation of kaivalyam, the release of purusha from the coils of prakriti through gnosis, discrimination, vijnana. I believe the development of Samkhya thought into the Goddess figure in the Devi Mahatmya is logical for two reasons: Firstly, Samkhya simply assumes the presence of purusha, the transcendent witness that is ontologically other than prakriti. Having somewhat arbitrarily deemed prakriti to be unconscious activity it comes up with the principle of purusha because there must be a witness. On the basis of this assumption it then builds a hierarchical binary that devalues material prakriti and subordinates it to purusha through asseverations to the effect that prakriti is for the sake of purusha, etc. Since the assumptions themselves are shaky, it is only logical to wonder at the need and efficacy of a separate purusha. Prakriti, after all, could be conscious agency. Secondly, the incorporation of Samkhya thought into theistic systems witnesses interesting changes, not the least of which is the pervasive identification of prakriti with the feminine and purusha with the male. Samkhya, itself does not make these gender claims. The dualism in Samkhya is, as Knut A. Jacobsen notes, “of matter and consciousness. To make an argument from two similes from SK (59, female dancer, 61, shy bride) about femininity of prakriti is to carry similes too far. There are also other similes in SK in which prakriti is compared to the milk feeding the calf and to a servant. These similes often illustrate a single point.... The female-male sexual polarity was added to the Samkhya concept of prakriti and purusha, which, however, originally were not thought of in terms of gender or sexual symbolism” (93-94). Clearly the injustice to prakriti needed to be righted, and since prakriti was increasingly seen as feminine
beautiful woman who is also an all-powerful warrior. She is not just the Divine Mother who gives birth, nurtures and cares for her progeny; she is also the virile protector of the gods, defender of the cosmic order/dharma. Or conversely she is the divine Creator, Preserver and Destroyer. She is adorned with resplendent ornaments and armed with deadly weapons. In other words, she embodies both shringara rasa and the quality of virya—the former culturally deemed the domain, power/weapon and preoccupation chiefly of women (and strongly linked with the workings of Maya, incidentally) while the latter considered a preserve of men—thus emphasising her transgender nature.

However, it is this gendered allocation of value, where “men’s bodies are the locus of heroism and women’s bodies of eroticism” (Humes, “Is the Devi Mahtmya a Feminist Scripture?” 139), that clearly informs the interaction between the Devi and her demonic adversaries. To begin with, the Goddess is not at all averse to playing the role of seductress to delude the demons. In the Srimad Devi Bhagvatam she tells Vishnu that “These two demons when deluded by My Maya, would be slain by you; I will delude them, certainly, by My side long [sic] glances” (31). Her actual facilitation of the killing of the demons Madhu and Kaitabha is described thus:

> Seeing Vishnu thus distressed, the Devi laughed loudly and began to look constantly with eyes somewhat reddish and shot towards the two Asuras side-long glances, of love and amorous feelings which were like arrows from the Cupid. The two vicious Daityas became fascinated by the side-long glances of the Devi and took great pleasure in them; being extremely agitated by these amorous darts looked with one stady gaze towards the Devi, of spotless luster. Bhagavan Hari too saw the wonderful enchanting pastime of Devi.... (32)

Incidentally, the instrumental use of females (celestial or mortal) as femme fatales by the gods to bring about the destruction of those who challenge their authority,
whether *asura* or mortal, has a hoary lineage.\(^{175}\) It is also another salient cultural conviction that finds transformed expression in these texts. The Devi is not just a heteronomous *shakti*, possessed by the male Gods and dependent on their direction. Rather she is the only autonomous Shakti that subsumes all; she is the controlling agent of this divine *Lila*. Thus an inherently misogynistic construction of women as death-dealing temptresses inflaming unrighteous passions in men is given a radical twist in the figure of the Supreme Goddess.

Then again, it is very clear that the *asuras* misperceive and relate to the Devi only as a woman. From their propositions to her, from the manner in which they desire her, therefore, we can educe some of the socio-cultural conventions that undergird heterosexual relations. For instance, the *asuras*, on hearing of the Devi’s beauty immediately desire her both as a consort for sexual pleasure and as a trophy that along with the other exquisite possessions they have wrested from the *devas* such as the elephant Airavata, the Parijata tree, the seven-faced horse, the *apsaras*, etc., will only redound to their greater glory. This desire of theirs can be seen as an expression of the cultural conflation of woman-as-companion and woman-as-property, a conflation that hinges on the notion of man/husband as owner, lord and master of woman/wife. The *asuras* want to be the *pati*, lord, of the Devi. Interestingly the Devi too plays upon this assumption of the superiority of the husband when in her encounter with Shumbha and Nishumbha she talks of

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\(^{175}\) For instance, according to one of the countless tales in the *Mahabharata*, Bhishma instructs Yudhisthira on the creation of evil women thus:

I will tell you my son, how Brahma created wanton women, and for what purpose. For there is nothing more evil than women; a wanton woman is a blazing fire; she is the illusion born of Maya; she is the sharp edge of the razor; she is poison, a serpent and death all in one.

These creatures were full of *dharma*; so we have heard. And since they would become gods by themselves, the gods became alarmed. The gods went to Brahma, the Grandfather and informed him of what was on their minds, and they stood silent before him, with downcast faces. The lord Grandfather, learning what was in the hearts of the gods, created women by a magic ritual in order to delude mankind. Now the women of former creation had been virtuous, but these sinful sorceresses arose out of the creation performed by Prajapati. For the Grandfather gave them all the desires that can be desired, and those wanton women, lusting for sensual pleasures, began to stir men up. Then the lord of gods, the lord, created anger as the assistant of desire, and all creatures falling into the power of desire and anger, began to be attached to the women. (*O’Flaherty, Hindu Myths* 36-37)
her vow to only marry someone who could best her in combat: “Without defeating Me in battle no one can marry Me. So conquer Me soon and marry Me as you like” (Srimad Devi Bhagvatam 437). The other notion that surfaces time and again in their interactions is, as mentioned before, the traditional gendered association of women with matters of shringara (sexuality and eroticism or kama) and men with matters of virya (virility and heroism or tejas/tapas). The numerous speeches addressed to the Devi in the Srimad Devi Bhagvatam by the asura kings and their envoys are crucially premised on such an assumption; an assumption which finds expression in the form of two related convictions that propel the various demonic attempts at conciliation and persuasion. On the one

\[176\] This also perhaps reveals the reason for the Devi being unmarried. She cannot find a husband because there is no one who is superior to her. Since there is no match for her in terms of prowess, she must remain unmatched for written into the notion of the husband-wife relation is the domination/supremacy of the husband and submission/inferiority of the wife. There is no such dilemma for the male gods who all have spouses that are clearly subordinate to them. The ultimate dharma of a wife, whether mortal or divine, it seems therefore, is to be a pativrata who worships her husband as her lord. The Devi, however, can find no Other to lord it over her and so by the logic of the institution of matrimony must remain unwed.

\[177\] This dichotomy is part of the elaborate aesthetic symbolism developed in texts such as the Natyashastra. For instance, according to chapter 24 of this text, the natural graces of women are “Sportive Mimicry (lila), Amorous Gesture (vilasa), Dishabille (vicchitti), Confusion (vihrama), Hysterical Mood (kilakinchita), Manifestation of Affection (vittayitta), Pretended Anger (kuttamita), Affected Coldness (bibboka), Lolling (lalita), and Want of Response (vihrita)”; their involuntary graces are “Beauty (shobha), Charm (kanti), Delicacy (madhurya), Radiance (dipti), Self-control (dhairya), Courage (pragalbhaya) and dignity (audarya).” As against this the “Eight aspects of the male’s Sattva” are as follows: “Brilliant Character (shobha), Graceful Bearing (vilasa), Self-possession (madhurya), Steadiness (sthairya), Gravity (gambhirya), Sportiveness (lalita), Nobility (audarya), and Spirit (tejas)” (447: 12-13, 24, 34). Elsewhere, the Natyashastra describes shringara or the “erotic affair” as “the union of man and woman which finds them sexually united.... This benefits the two, and brings them happiness.” Having identified worldly happiness with this erotic affair, it then goes on to explicitly attribute a special identity between women and shringara saying, “In this world people always desire happiness of which women are indeed the source” (456; XXIV 97, 98). Such is the hold of these, and like, taxonomies on the Indian cultural imagination that they not only inform the kavya tradition, but also instruct the philosophical and religious delineations of gender. However, as Neela Bhattacharya Saxena rightly reminds us, the absolute difference posited between kama and tejastapas, especially in the ascetic traditions of India is ultimately simplistic, if not specious reasoning, since “in actuality there is no distinction between kama and tapas.” Among others, she goes on to quote Walter Kaelber, who maintained that “Although the notion of ‘heat’ is central, the Sanskrit root tap, as articulated, assumes various convergent and divergent meanings in Vedic literature.... tapas refers also to the natural heat associated with procreation, including biological conception and embryonic maturation” (Tapta Marga 29 as ctd. in Saxena 106). For more details, refer to the 3rd chapter of her book entitled In the Beginning Is Desire. Tantric beliefs, too, go against such a differentiation as they are vitally premised on the close connections between kama and tapas. Indeed, as mentioned before, the figure of Shiva is sufficient testimony of this.
hand, the asuras are firmly convinced that women, deprived of virya and lacking in martial strength, are constitutionally unfit for the rigours of battle. Thus there are numerous exhortations to the effect that “You are a woman; the lord of the Daityas is a hero; how can a battle be engaged between you two. It seems to be impossible. Your body is delicate, a girl in full youth…” (Srimad Devi Bhagvatam 386); that it is far more befitting for the Devi to choose sexual pleasures rather than battle for “The women [are supposed to] fight with their side glances and amorous gestures; but I have never heard a woman like you coming to fight with arms and weapons. Even the delicate flowers, Malati, etc., cause pain on the bodies of beautiful women like you; so it is not advisable to fight against you with flowers even; what to speak of sharpened arrows!” (401). On the other hand, because such is the case, i.e., women are weak, and because women are consistently identified with a sexual existence and sensibility, some demons also believe that when the Devi challenges them to combat she could not but be indulging in sexual innuendo. Thus they come up with rather ingenious interpretations of her words:

O honourable Lady! The sentence uttered by Thee “He who will conquer me in battle” is full of deep meanings…. O Beautiful One! “Battle” means two different things according to persons for whom it is intended; it is of two kinds—One out of excitement and another out of sexual intercourse. With Thee, the sexual intercourse is intended; and with any other enemy, excitement in a real fight is meant…. O Beautiful One! I know Thy intentions fully. In Thy heart reigns that fight for sexual intercourse…. The powerful Shumbha knows the real meaning of the fight of sexual intercourse; so he will easily conquer Thee…. The lord of the Daityas, expert in the science of love, will certainly conquer Thee engaged in amorous fight and will lay Thee stretched on a soft bedding and will make Thee tired; he will make Thy body covered with blood by striking with nails and he will bite Thy lips to pieces; then Thou wilt perspire profusely and wilt cease fighting. Thus Thy mental desire for fight—sexual intercourse will be satisfied. (Srimad Devi Bhagvatam 409-10)

If these episodes are taken to be vignettes of gender relations then one can be forgiven for concluding that in the worldview of these texts heterosexual interactions regularly translate as asymmetrical exercises of power involving different types of male domination and female submission. Erotic love as the asuras seem to understand it is only “war by other means”; a war that women can fight, for it is their arena, but not win, for their desire, in accordance with stri
svabhava, is to be finally conquered. In other words, heterosexual relations seem to be premised upon a strict understanding of men and women as different in terms of their natures, functions and powers. Women seen as saturated with sexuality are associated with matters of the body (it is presumed that they have no control over their senses but instead are governed by them) and *ipso facto* devalued while men seen as embodiments of virility are associated with matters of heroism and transcendence (a heroism, *virya*, premised on the successful control of the senses) and *ipso facto* valorised.

In view of the above, it is clearly untenable to posit a naïve identity between the Goddess and ordinary women. Indeed, the Goddess herself seems to bristle at such easy equations. In the *Srimad Devi Bhagvatam*, she sternly rebukes an asura ambassador for his foolish presumption thus:

O Stupid One! Did you think a little beforehand the meaning of your words when you told me of my feminine nature? Though I am not apparently a man, yet my nature is that of the Highest Purusha (Man); I shew myself simply in a feminine form. Your master asked before from Brahma that he would prefer death, if possible, at the hands of a woman; therefore I consider him quite illiterate and ignorant of the sentiment, worthy of a hero. Because to die at the hands of a woman is very painful for one who is a hero; and this gladly welcome to one who is a hermaphrodite. (*Srimad Devi Bhagvatam* 387)

Later in the same text she also rebuffs Mahishasura’s sexual solicitations, saying:

I do not desire to enjoy the ordinary pleasures; you are very dull and stupid; there is no doubt in this, when you desire sexual union. For women are considered as chains to hold men in bondage. Men bound up by iron chains can obtain freedom at any time, but when they are fastened by women, they can never obtain freedom. O Stupid! You now want to serve the source of urine, etc. Take refuge under Peace; peace will lead you to happiness. Great pain arises from connection with women.... (*Srimad Devi Bhagvatam* 408)

And yet in the *Devi Mahatmya* her own *bhaktas* claim that, “All the various knowledges, O Goddess, are portions of you, as is each and every woman in the

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178 After all even though they pledge undying love, the demon kings also command their envoys to drag her to their court by her hair in disgrace, if she resists.

179 Manu the ancient lawgiver uses such a manoeuvre, for instance.

180 These discriminations are so pervasive that they can be said to function, following Bourdieu, as the habitus of men and women, respectively, a kind of “bodily hexis.” And what is this hexis? “Bodily hexis is political mythology realized, em-bodied, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable way of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking” (Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* 13).
various worlds” (Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess* 74; 11.5). So where does the Goddess stand vis-à-vis women? 181

This is not a very easy question to answer. Especially since both the *Devi Mahatmya* and the *Srimad Devi Bhagvatam*, it must be admitted, are ultimately concerned with a male bhakta’s relationship to the Devi. Women here are peripheral to this experience, mentioned only as useful means or impediments in facilitating this relationship. This marginality of women, not surprisingly, finds a mirror in the mythic world of both the texts. As mentioned before both the asuras and the devas are gendered male. The only speaking female in these myths is the Goddess. Thus, to infer the nature of women with any degree of certitude and comprehensively, from the marginal notes of these myths is fraught with many difficulties. All that can be asserted is that the Goddess is a *phenomenal woman*—she is always female incarnate, and infinitely more than “feminine.” Her interactions with both the asuras and the suras bear this out, but with a crucial difference. The asuras approach her in the Tantric vira bhava, as a male lover approaching a female beloved, confident of their own superior prowess. This is a fatal error for the Devi’s desire cannot be sated or controlled. She can drain Raktabija of his vital fluids (blood and seed/semen), dry up his amazing fecundity

181 It will perhaps be meet to mention here that some critics perceive an ideological wedge between the *Devi Mahatmya* and the *Srimad Devi Bhagvatam*. Cynthia Ann Humes, for one, is firmly convinced that the latter text is an instance of the patriarchal co-optation of the Goddess tradition to serve androcentric, and worse, misogynistic ends. In her essay “Is the *Devi Mahatmya* a Feminist Scripture?” apart from the foregoing quotation that finds no equivalent in the *Devi Mahatmya*, she also cites the several pejorative references to women—their weakness, cowardice, moral turpitude, cunning, carnality—that liberally pepper the telling of the *Srimad Devi Bhagvatam*. Once again, she finds that the *Devi Mahatmya* is not the inspiration for such gynophobic sentiments. What clinches the case for her is the conspicuous absence in the Shaka Purana of the explicit relation that is posited between women and the Goddess in the *Devi Mahatmya* (“Is the *Devi Mahatmya* a Feminist Scripture?” 123-50). While the presence of these negative delineations of women cannot be denied, I am not sure I quite agree with Humes’ reading of sexist recuperation in the *Srimad Devi Bhagvatam*. For if one is fair to the entire text, then the explicit association that Humes finds between women and the Devi in the *Devi Mahatmya* is very much present in the *Srimad Devi Bhagvatam*; only in another section (809; bk. 9, ch. 1). This text also contains the startling episode where Hari, Hara, and Brahma can attend on the Devi in her Mani Dvipa abode (the highest of all abodes) only by becoming females (128; bk. 3, ch. 4). The implication seems to be that the Devi only allows women into her sanctum sanctorum. When taken along with the several assertions of the infinite superiority of the Goddess to the male gods that also liberally pepper its telling, I think it is slightly unfair to tag this text as a patriarchal co-optation of the Goddess tradition.
and still not be exhausted, subjugated or satisfied. On the other hand, the devas approach her in the Shakta bhakti mode as a child approaches its mother with no pretensions to its own power, openly seeking mercy, grace, protection and indulgence. Indeed in some ways, it is this right cognition, right discrimination of reality that is the reason for their survival, for their victory over the asuras. In both her roles thus, as sexual woman/warrior and as mother, the Devi is different from ordinary women. Her desire is creative or destructive at will, but most importantly it is self-satisfying, inexhaustible and unconquerable. Similarly, while she is compassionate and gentle, saumya, she is also raudra, a stern taskmaster who punishes and destroys while dispensing justice. In fact to the extent that the Goddess combines power with the authority to exercise that power, she is clearly other than women variously situated in different androcentric socio-cultural matrices. But at the same time it cannot be denied that ultimately, the Devi, this supreme reality is only manifest as female. So if nothing else, as the Devi Mahatmya asserts, women intimately share in her divinity.

Understood in these terms the Devi Mahatmya and the Srimad Devi Bhagvatam seem not to upset the patriarchal apple cart of tradition too much. Yet, at another level, both these texts are deeply subversive, if not outright revolutionary. To use a phrase of Mary Daly’s both these texts communicate a “Gyn/Ecology”; they realise a Gyn/Ecological truth. Or if that is too western, too modern an understanding, then these texts can just as well, in fact better, be described as instances of prakritic feminism—as a resurrection of that prakriti consistently traduced “for the sake of” an insufficiently argued for purusha. These texts

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182 Humes has understood this as a variety of castration myth but I think to read it so is to repeat precisely the asuric error of misapprehending the Devi’s nature (“Is the Devi Mahatmya a Feminist Scripture?”123-50). Raktabija, the demon is no more purely masculine, than the Devi is just feminine! If she is Mahadevi, she is also Mahasuri. In the Tantras, in fact, Rakta is one of the names and forms of Kali—Raktakali.

183 For an interesting delineation of the gendered distribution of power and authority read Rita M. Gross’ “Is the Goddess a Feminist?” (108).

184 Samkhya argues for the presence of the purusha in these terms: “[The existence] of Soul [is inferred] from the fact that the combination [of the principles of Nature into their various effects]
present a regnant prakriti setting the records straight, as it were, after years of misrepresentation: “O You, a veritable Fool! I have no necessity for My lord; I have got nothing to do with my lord. I Myself am the Lord of all the beings; and I preserve this whole Universe with all the lords and beings therein” (Srimad Devi Bhagvatam 445). True, both the texts inscribe an Advaitic consciousness but their Advaita is given a radical spin insofar as the Goddess is posited as the ultimate reality and insofar as this reality is only manifest as female. What this does is effectively explode the myth of a pure purusha, a pure, transcendent masculinity. It is in this regard that I believe both the Devi Mahatmya and the Srimad Devi Bhagvatam are invaluable resources for those looking to destabilise settled dichotomous and hierarchised notions of gender. They are both inscriptions of and inspirations for a prakritic/materialist feminism, a prakritic metaphysics.185

As for the elaborations of desire as female/feminine in these texts, displayed are a range of possibilities and valencies. Primal desire, as seen in the Devi’s emanations and actions, is infinitely creative, conscious, autonomous, playful, merciful and positive. Desire when understood as simply uncontrolled passion or lust and embodied by women, as also available in the Devi’s interactions with the asuras is variously destructive, deadly, illusory, and negative.186 The demarcation,
itself, of course, is an old one. What is new is the share of women in these polarities. In the earlier determinations, the female/feminine was to be expunged *(maya* as *avidya* in realisation of Brahman), excluded *(prakriti* in *purusha's kaivalyam*) or allowed qualified inclusion as a subsumed part of the Whole *(shakti as belonging to Ishvara).* Consequently, women carried the exclusive burdens of negativity, evanescence, deception and/or materiality on their bodies and in their desires. Alternatively, they found limited legitimacy and a meagre share of the spiritual pie when their bodies and/or desires were properly subordinated and assimilated into patriarchal corpora and schemes. The Devi texts are radical insofar as both the positive as well as negative aspects of desire are manifestly female. Willy-nilly, this expands the range of being and valence for women’s desire, which conceptually, at least, is not now voided or isolated from an autonomously creative, transcendent or quiescent consciousness that is privileged.

**Conclusion**

The above schematic has not been an attempt to freeze the many possible relations of desire. But if meaning, as the postmodernists believe, can only be achieved through a repression of sorts, it should hardly be surprising that in order to express the foregoing meanings of desire, I have had to repress others, both intentionally, and inevitably. For instance, my typology talks about Bhakti as desire and Bhakti desire only as an experience of want, yet the variety of devotional expressions amply suggest that there are other valid ways of figures do not quite set themselves up as objects of desire. Rather the bevy of beauties they control *(the apsaras or in Mara’s case, his three daughters)* are set to the task of achieving their purpose through seduction. In contradistinction when such desire is embodied female, even the Devi herself can achieve her purpose only by entering the transaction as the object of male gaze and male appetite. This is confirmed also, when Vishnu decides to seduce and becomes Mohini. He does not do so in his own or another guise as a beautiful male. I think, this is primarily because patriarchal cultures only really grant the privileged status of independent and significant subject to male members of its social order.

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187 Or, as Coburn writes in his *Encountering the Goddess,* “by the time of our text [i.e., the *Devi Mahaimya*] they [i.e., the conceptual triumvirate of *prakriti, maya* and *shakti*] had collectively come to designate a secondary or lesser form of reality, an instrument that is ontologically connected to the male deity, on which he relies in the creation of the universe. The words also refer to the results of God’s creative activity, which he unfolds, or projects, or exfoliates out of his own primary reality” (20).
understanding bhakti. The Bhaktisutras of Narada, for one, say that devotion is first and foremost paramapremarupa (2; aph. 2); “It is not led by desire, because it finds expression in (the) inhibition (of all desires)” (4; aph. 7). Bhakti arises “from its cultivation without remiss, or from unflinching adoration of God”; “from listening to and singing of the virtues and attributes of the Great God in society”; but most “principally and surely, by the grace of the great ones, or in other words, from the touch of divine compassion” (18-19; aph. 36, 37, 38). “Devoid of qualification, bereft of desire, growing in volume and intensity at every moment, and having a ceaseless flow, it is of the form of subtler feeling” (25; aph. 54). And finally, it delineates the different forms that this bhakti sentiment might take:

Devotion, though one in kind, still appears in eleven forms according as it takes the course of attachment to the attributes and greatness of God, attachment to His beauty, attachment to His worship, attachment to His memories, attachment to His service, attachment to His friendship, attachment to parental affection towards Him, attachment to him (as) of a beloved wife, attachment to self-consecration, attachment to self-absorption or Godliness, and attachment to permanent self-effacement. (35; aph. 82)

Any number of such exceptions, alternatives and variations can be found for each of my equations, as indeed, overlaps and contiguities between them. To admit that my schema both excludes and represses in its particular substantiations does not, however, automatically disqualify or invalidate it; especially since it was neither premised on the vaunt of comprehensiveness nor impelled by a belief in some single all-encompassing and enduring meaning of desire just waiting to be hermeneutically revealed.

\[188\] The Bhagavata Purana, the other major text from which some Bhakti traditions draw their inspiration, lists nine types of bhakti, viz., sravanam or hearing God’s glories/name, kirtanam or singing his glory, smaranam or right remembrance, padasevanam or rendering service unto his feet, archanam or worship, vandanam or prostrations, dasyam or slavery/surrender, sakhyam or friendship and atmanivedanam or sacrifice of the self (as listed and glossed in Ramaswamy 114). As Ramaswamy notes, madhuri bhakti or the nayaka-nayika bhava between God and devotee, which I have focused upon in my delineation of Bhakti desire as want, does not find mention here (115). Of course, eight of the listed forms of bhakti can still be understood as varying expressions of desire as want, given the hierarchy and devotion implicit in their articulations. Sakhyam or friendship, however, offers a potentially other equation of Bhakti desire and devotion.
It is true this chapter is not some blueprint for desire with a capital D, then. Neither is it a precise disaggregation of desire, only a various, fleeting and, perforce, partial intimation of it. But in a subtle way, the very contingency of its exemplifications buttresses the one conviction that does consistently inform the entire thesis, viz., that desire has reality only in its relations, in the contexts and conjunctures, forms and modalities in which it finds expression; that the significant “whats” of desire cannot be posed or comprehended in isolation from the “whos,” “wheres,” “hows” and “whens” of its articulation. My schema, I believe, registers such an understanding by simultaneously gesturing towards some of the many ways in which desire has been/can be related (narrated) as well as towards the close relations (kinship) between the idea of desire expressed and operational notions of power, will, pleasure, gender and sexuality, self and other. Indeed, each of its units, independently as well as cumulatively, is oriented towards clarifying such a parallel understanding of desire especially as this meshes with the other dominant analytical concern espoused here, viz., gender relations. This, in the end, is the only validity-claim that it stakes. Needless to say, all the while that it proposes this almost Buddhist understanding of desire as pratityasamutpada (co-dependent origination) and kshanic reality, it is acutely aware of itself as just another relation of desire, subject to the selfsame vagaries of time and place, cause and effect, text and context.

Then again, I have preferred using English terms to head my schematic even when the subjects studied under their description clearly belong to indigenous

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189 Of course, in this instance I have concentrated on how certain articulations of desire signify for the conduct of gender relations, specifically as they may/have impact(ed the subjectivity of those designated women. Incidentally, if one is looking to trace the pedigree of such articulations, while I consciously loop it back to a feminist insistence on the personal as political, Ramanjun in his “Is There an Indian Way of Thinking” would track the penchant back, rather uncomfortably, to that signature Indian feminists love to hate, i.e., Manu. As he informs us “To be moral, for Manu, is to particularize—to ask who did what, to whom and when” (40).

190 I think in its elaboration my schema demonstrates sufficiently the difficulty of discussing desire in any one of its postulated forms (as want, plenitude, power, pleasure, male/masculine, female/feminine) without simultaneously and necessarily taking into account the other concepts. Thus each relation of desire in my schema is an engagement, as stated above, with operational notions of power, will, pleasure, gender and sexuality, self and other—the very co-ordinates of my schema.
cultural traditions with well-developed terminologies of their own. Instead of desire as bhakti, sadhana/siddhi or kama, that is, I have opted for desire as want, power and pleasure, among others. Why is this so? For two reasons. Firstly, to foreground that this is a work of discursive superposition, of strategic translation of texts and practices; to acknowledge and maintain the otherness of the subjects explored to the analysis offered even while continuing to study them. And secondly, through precisely that translation, through the partial visibility and intelligibility it affords, to bring these essentially premodern, cultural articulations of affect, action and ideology into some sort of dialogue with the modern discursive frames of desire in Indian English literary criticism.

What begs the question still though is why these particular texts and collectives as exemplifications and not others? Why the focus on philosophical, dialectical and religious texts? Why not erotica and works of shringara and kama? Aren’t the former set of texts actually the handiwork and preoccupation of the “creamy layer” of society in times of yore, specialised in the sensibilities they present and inaccessible, for the most part, to the lay person, especially women? Apart from the usual, and valid enough, disclaimers which I have duly issued to cover for my limited offerings, in conclusion, I would like to offer a couple of other reasons for the overall cast of my selections.

First off, I have not identified desire with kama. Kama is one expression of desire, of course, but far from having a monopoly on desire. Accordingly, I have explored the phenomenon of desire as libidinal pleasure codified in the Kamasutra without making of it either a dominant or singular focus. Much of premodern Indian erotica and love poems, I believe, are good or bad, heavily stylised, literary versions and variations of this aesthetics of kama and shringara rasa available in classical texts such as the Kamasutra and the Natyashastra. Besides, in terms of access, these are no more really “popular” writings than the other texts, or, rather, their popularity is of a similar order to the other set of texts. They are usually productions of an urbane courtly culture, composed in Sanskrit
with obvious expertise in classical poetics, and more often than not, male-authored though far from lacking in "heroines." 191

I go for religious and philosophical formulations because willy-nilly these marry desire with soteriology, with deontology. Even when not actively didactic and missionary, such as the Upanishads or the Tantras, even when produced from sites of privilege and practiced in seclusion or secrecy, that is, as texts and traditions which engage with the nature of Ultimate Truth/Reality and humankind's place in the larger scheme of things, their conceptualisations are likely to seep into mainstream culture over time and become a part of public and private memory and morality. 192 As such, they are directly or indirectly invested in the processes

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191 For e.g., Kalidasa, Amaru, Jaidev, Jagannatha. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita in their invaluable two volumes of Women Writing in India talk of women poets and scholars attached to the Tanjavur courts. The one work they name and provide translated excerpts of, however, is Radhika Santwanam, an erotic epic by Muddupalani, an eighteenth century courtesan belonging to the same courts (1:116).

192 The basis for such convictions, I suppose, is acceptance of a certain model of cultural diffusion, wherein while the difference between marga and desi traditions is readily granted, they are, nonetheless not seen existing as absolutely cut off, watertight cultures. Rather, as Makarand Paranjape holds, "folktales and motifs get absorbed into high culture, are refined from their local habitation and colour, and become representative of abstract and universal ideas. On the other hand, such abstractions from the marga tradition get vernacularized and localized to such an extent that they seem to lose their connection with their origins and become totally desi" (Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel 89). Or as Ruth Vanita maintains, Written and oral traditions have never been far apart in India. Medieval devotional songs by mystics addressed to individual deities may appear to be remote from Upanishadic traditions but in fact they constantly refer to the Upanishadic idea of the oneness of the individual self with the Universal Self. The regional variations of epic and Puranic stories encountered in folk songs, tales and theater are matched by the variations in Sanskrit texts.... texts written in languages of the elite ... [need not] inherently perpetuate oppressive attitudes to lower castes, tribal peoples and women.... Texts produced by men in patriarchal and hierarchical societies [need not] necessarily or uniformly legitimize patriarchal oppression, nor does the stated aim of the author always match what the body of the text expresses and represents. [Then again] orality is no guarantor of liberatory attitudes nor are lower caste and tribal societies free of gender oppression. (Preface, Same-Sex Love in India xvi-xvii).

Elsewhere in the same text, she says, "the process of assimilation is active on both ends of this cultural spectrum and ... it strengthens both [the marga and desi traditions]. Written texts in India do not speak with one voice. Almost all originate in oral traditions and were built in layers over time..." (xvi). For evidence of such cultural exchange in the epic traditions, refer to K. Satchidanandan. Paraphrasing Romila Thapar, he writes, "No single text in India has ever been exclusively titled Ramayana. It is the name of a tradition, a multiplicity of oral, written and performed texts, each equally authentic as a creation of popular imagination" (Introduction, Retelling the Ramayana 1). Reinforcing the point, he continues,
of subject constitution and social engineering, exercising a various and subtle influence on individual and collective psyches, individual and collective desires. As such, also, they seem, at least to my mind, well suited to explore and understand the intersection of desire and gender socialisation in a broader cultural paradigm.

This story is available in several versions in several languages: besides all mainstream Indian languages and many marginalized languages such as Tulu, and tribal languages like Bhili and Santhali; we find the tale in Annamese, Balinese, Cambodian, Chinese, Javanese, Laotian, Malaysian, Thai, and Tibetan. Sanskrit alone has more than twenty-five tellings in different forms. There is also a whole range of performed Ramayanas as in Ramleela, Ramannattam, Kathakali, mask plays, puppet plays, shadow plays and other folk dance and drama forms. Besides there are paintings, sculptures and bas-reliefs, inscriptions, and traditional hand-woven narrative designs all of which provide visual interpretation to the story. (Introduction, Retelling the Ramayana)

Incidentally, neither Vyasa nor Valmiki, the sages to whom traditionally authorship of the Mahabharata and Ramayana, respectively, is ascribed, belong to the upper-castes proper. Vyasa is said to be of mongrel breed while Valmiki is supposed to be a shudra of the hunter caste. Both, however, are undisputedly, at least till date, men. In any case, the point is, in my schema, the Bhakti as well as Puranic and even Tantric texts and practices I see as facilitating this two-way osmosis, this cross-pollination of ideas and affects. For a brief helpful exposition of marga and desi as linguistic, conceptual and cultural categories, refer to M. Srimannarayana Murti’s “Cultural Discourse—Desi and Marga” (58-83).

193 By way of example can be cited the nineteenth century deployment of Advaita Vedanta by different sections of the indigenous populace for social and political ends, such as, Sree Narayana Guru and the Ezhava movement in Kerala, Mahadev Govind Ranade and his Prarthana Samaj in Maharashtra, Dayanand Saraswati and his Arya Samaj in colonial north India, Raja Ramohun Roy and his Brahmo Samaj in Bengal, Ramakrishna and his protégé Vivekananda’s Ramakrishna Mission, etc. Later uses of non-dualist notions can be seen in Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Gandhi, among others. Tapan Raychaudhuri mentions how, “We learn from the nineteenth-century autobiographies that school children in Bengal habitually debated the nature of Godhead, whether he had any form or was formless” (Perceptions, Emotions, Sensibilities 97). Then again, K. N. Panikkar mentions several heterodox sects springing up in “almost all parts of” 5 eighteenth- and nineteenth-century India, such as “the Satnami, the Appapant and Shivnarayan sects in Uttar Pradesh, the Kartabhajas and balramis in Bengal, the Charandas in Rajasthan and the Virabhramas in Andhra Pradesh” (5) who challenged dominant Hindu practices from within the traditional. He gives the example of Charan Das who “invoked Vedic authority for anti-idolatory and anti-casteism” (5). For an account of the Bauls, another of the many sects proliferating at the time, their sandhya bhasha, their Tantric philosophy, etc., refer to Jeanne Openshaw’s Seeking the Bauls of Bengal. Currently, there are efforts evident, on the Right and Left wings of the political spectrum, to appropriate the Goddess tradition/s. On top of this, there are also ideologically mixed-up feminists, ideologically suspect Indologists, ideologically promiscuous subalternists and ecologists of a various hue reading and re-reading the Devi, each according to their own persuasion. Of course, owing to the intervention of commercial cinema, the transformation of a demure, much put-upon woman into the angry, animated sakshatrupa of the Devi, complete with eyes rolling, tongue lolling, hair unloosed and trident in animated arm is a popular stereotype for female agency in present-day India.
In speaking of a broader cultural paradigm, yet studying only “Hindu” texts and traditions, am I not guilty of running them together, though? Indeed, why only “Hindu” texts and traditions? Even conceding my point about the greater implication of religious works in gender socialisation and subject-constitution, especially in pre-modern times, India, as the famed cradle of religions, surely offers more than just “Hindu” spirituality to choose from. So why not study the articulations of desire, also, for example, in Sufi, Jain, Sikh, Christian or Parsee texts and traditions?

I have already stated that the stand-ins for “Indian” in my schematic are neither representative nor all that could be. Nonetheless, the limited offerings may seem too culturally homogenous in its selections to satisfy everybody. I accept that criticism as just but perhaps unavoidable. Given my specific knowledge in the field, the alternative would have been political correctness and tokenism. I might have considered that still, if it had answered the purpose. It did not. The task of categorically delineating the limits of both India and Indian/ness requires a different approach and expertise. In my case, all tokenism would have accomplished is further dilute whatever little focus this study has been able to muster. More positively, I decided to focus on “Hindu” texts and traditions rather than any other because, in the Indian context, taken together, they provide a certain loose, evocative continuity through time and space; they have a certain broad though diffuse cultural presence and currency. Then again, at some level, I also rationalise my decision through negative reasoning: while granting that positive assertions on the Indian-ness of my preferences may lead to heartburn for its obvious and/or hidden occlusions as these stand perceived, in the current

194 While I am personally not of that mind, there are others who would point to this as precisely and purely the fiction engendered by varieties of nineteenth-century reformist urgencies. Without accepting this contention, but conceding the point for argument’s sake, I would still say, it does not seriously undermine the validity of my choice. Since the novel form and the articulations of desire it substantiated was largely the production of just the cross-section of people who were in the forefront of social reform initiatives as well as at, and to, whom these reform movements were principally addressed, viz., the emergent Indian middle-classes, among whom “Hindus” had a considerable presence. As fact or fiction, that is, the ideologies and practices, acts and affects, studied above provide a functional matrix within which the question of the novel form and its intersects with desire can be provisionally posed and studied.
discursive scene, I ask if the converse could be stated unequivocally, that my choices are not Indian? The “Hindu” selections signify “Indian,” in other words, not as simple metaphor transfiguring the signified, India, nor indeed as metonymy only strongly associated with it, but as synecdoche in the specific reduction that inscribes them as part of the whole—a reduction that is not necessary or automatic, moreover, but both possible and, in this instance, practical.

Finally, a more specific word on how this schema might inform my study of the intersection of desire with the novel form. Given the acknowledged contingency of the examples provided here, it should be obvious that I will not be looking to establish a one-to-one correspondence between these delineations and what I might find in the novels. The different constraints of particular novels, I am aware, are quite likely to make for different relations. What I have sought to do is provide a working idea of some of the dominant cultural “pretexts” of desire that both were unevenly available to a nineteenth-century Indian emergent middle-class consciousness and continue to be available, albeit more tenuously, to their present-day heirs. This is so as to better culturally inflect my understanding of the interactions of desire with the novel genre that has been a middle-class production by and large. On the one hand, then, the examples studied here are useful as a foil to broadly set off the specificities of the relations of desire that constitute the novel genre in India. On the other, they serve as a resource to help identify the resonance of similar cultural ideas and expressions in the novels; to discern some of the possible cultural subtexts of, and alternative sensibilities in, novels, that is. Besides this, the schematic frame prefigures the rough grid within which my analyses of novels will find shape in the second part of the thesis. The coordinates of want, plenitude, pleasure, power, male/masculinity, female/femininity in their diverse imbrication with desire will, either in isolation or varying degrees and kinds of combination, collaboration and opposition, be my entry points to the world of novels. Of course, other vectors do get introduced to accentuate and further focus the understanding of desire and gender relations in
novels but these will remain the implicit theoretical core around which I construct my study.
Chapter 2: Novel Desires

Once upon a time ... actually, in the nineteenth century in India, the novel happened. But before engaging frontally with the central concern of this chapter, i.e., this novel happening, I would like to attach a few prefatory comments on the nature of generic forms as a possible framework for the ensuing speculations. For this purpose I will be taking rather liberal recourse to the insights of Tzvetan Todorov, among others.

So what is a genre? According to Todorov, “[a] genre, whether literary or not, is nothing other than the codification of discursive properties” (18). And where do they come from? “Quite simply from other genres. A new genre is always the transformation of an earlier one, or of several: by inversion, by displacement, by combination” (15). Furthermore, “[l]ike any other institution, genres bring to light the constitutive features of the society to which they belong.... society chooses and codifies the acts that correspond most closely to its ideology; that is why the existence of certain genres in one society, their absence in another, are revelatory of that ideology and allow us to establish it more or less confidently” (19).

Todorov’s formulations serve very well to describe the dynamics of genre formations in general. However, they are primarily concerned with generic developments in situ. Todorov’s study is synchronic, systemic, generalised: the question that engages him is “what presides over the birth of a genre, at any time” (16), and one might add, in any place. What it neither sets out to take into account, nor does, except at best tangentially and tenuously, are issues of geo-cultural crossovers, transferences, grafts and super/impositions in the development of generic forms. Thus any simplistic application of the Todorovian understanding to study the genre of the novel in India, where, in its inchoate stages, matters were considerably complicated by the overarching architectonics of colonialism, can only be ultimately misleading and reductive.

195 To understand what he means by “discursive properties,” refer to Genres in Discourse (18).
This is even more so since earlier certitudes regarding the generic definition of the novel itself have, in recent times, been found wanting, grounded on skewed understanding and/or specious analysis. In fact there is a growing critical consensus, in the Western modernist and postmodernist context but also in India, regarding the ultimately protean nature of the novel form. Indian critics, especially, are beginning to bemoan the “tyranny of realism” and the uncritical valorisation, even fetishisation, of a particular type of the novel, i.e., the realist novel, as the exclusive norm and type of the form itself. This critical myopia has, according to Makarand Paranjape and others, grievously short-circuited our understanding of the “evolution and dissolution of literary genres” (Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel 80), in this case, the novel. To quote Paranjape, “[t]he variety and the variation in its form suggest that, far from being easily definable or fixed, it is a dynamic, protean, and plastic genre. In fact the

196 Maurice Blanchot, for instance, has argued for the contemporary obsolescence of generic divisions in literature in his The Space of Literature; Marthe Robert in The Origins of the Novel speaks of it as a constitutively “undefined genre” (225). Franco Moretti says “And instead, all great theories of the novel have precisely reduced the novel to one basic form only (realism, the dialogic, romance, meta-novels...); and if the reduction has given them their elegance and power, it has also erased nine-tenths of literary history. Too much” (“Graphs, Maps Trees”). In India, critics such as Bhalchandra Nemade, Namwar Singh, Meenakshi Mukherjee, Harish Trivedi, Makarand Paranjape and Jasbir Jain, among others, have in different formulations emphasised the final irreducibility of novelistic ventures to over-strict and culturally naïve generic definitions.

197 The phrase is borrowed from Makarand Paranjape’s Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel.

198 To quote Trivedi, for instance, “Too many historians of the early Indian novel have over-valued the external features of the form to conclude that the early Indian novel is ‘something that is not yet a novel,’ as if it were a less-developed and retarded specimen rather than a valid variant in its own right” (“The Progress of Hindi, Part 2” 1006). A typical example of such criticism can be found for instance in K. S. Ramamurti’s essay, “The Rise of the Novel in India and the Rise of the English Novel” or in C. Jesudasan’s essay, “The Beginnings of the Tamil Novel” or Allan Wendt’s essay, “Babu to Sahib: Contemporary Indian Literature.” All three are published as part of a collection edited by M. Manuel and K. Ayappa Paniker, entitled English and India. To illustrate the point made by Trivedi and others, Ramamurti, for instance writes, “In fact Samuel Vedanayakam Pillai’s Pratapa Mudaliar Charithiram which is chronologically the first Tamil novel does not fully bear out the view that the rise of the Tamil novel was, like the rise of the English novel, associated with the rise of realism and individualism, for it is too episodic, romantic and overtly didactic a tale. For this reason Rajam Iyer and Madhaviah should be considered as truer pioneers of the Tamil novel than the author of Pratapa Mudaliar Charithiram which one should prefer to call a prose saga or a romance rather than a novel” (112). T. W. Clark, who edited The Novel in India, is another critic who demonstrates the tendency faulted by Trivedi.
novel is but a loose and inaccurate label for a very broad range of prose narratives" (Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel 77).

The point is well taken. The reservations and animadversions are, no doubt, apposite. However, "loose and inaccurate" as it might be, to abandon the generic label cannot be anything but counter-productive. To consider every literary venture to be sui generis, I believe, is to eventually scuttle our capacity for critical discrimination. Genres have invaluable taxonomic utility; indeed they are necessary and inevitable as conceptual aids to study the rather vast and amorphous corpus of literature. As Todorov argues:

[the] fact that a work "disobeys" its genre does not mean that the genre does not exist. It is tempting to say "quite the contrary," for two reasons. First because in order to exist as such, the transgression requires a law—precisely the one that is to be violated. We might go even further and observe that the norm becomes visible—comes into existence—owing only to its transgressions.... But there is more. Not only because, in order to be an exception, the work necessarily presupposes a rule; but also because no sooner is it recognized in its exceptional status than the work becomes a rule in turn.... Have not Joyce's exceptional word plays become the rule for a certain modern literature? Does not the novel, however "new" it may be, continue to exert its pressure on works being written today? (14-15)

To be fair to the aforementioned phalanx of Indian critics though, their censure is directed not so much towards a disavowal of generic categories and their critical employment and use value per se but against an ossified, sometimes fossilised, mostly culturally "innocent," and therefore, misinformed, reductive and insidious delineations of generic traits. Their concern is with what G. N. Devy calls "the crisis in contemporary literary criticism in India" caused by a "lapse in cultural memory ... which makes the average Indian intellectual incapable of tracing his tradition backwards beyond the mid-nineteenth century " (3, 10).

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199 These critics by no means represent a homogeneous school of thought. Rather they span the spectrum of ideological and theoretical positions in the Indian academy. As such there are various shades to the divisions and schisms amongst them. But their differences notwithstanding they concur on the flatulence and vacuity of much of contemporary Indian literary criticism (especially in English) emanating as it does from the bowels of an academia that is unable, or unwilling, to leave off playing the intellectual hillbilly to its metropolitan cousins in the West. Along with an institutional and systemic overhaul, these critics feel there is an urgent need for adopting a culturally and historically sensitive approach to literary criticism.

200 Devy's diagnosis of a "crisis" in Indian literary criticism is based on the following symptoms:
Vis-à-vis the novel form, they aver that the prevalent understanding of it is not only mostly out of time, fixated on the "realism" of a particular historical epoch, but more significantly, out of place. And it is the hybrid provenance of Indian novelistic enterprises as well as a holistic literary critical perspective on them that have been the major casualties of the occluding dominance of these misplaced readings of the genre. As such what they desire is the jettisoning of the traces of a culturally craven, Eurocentric mindset manifest in these heuristic tendencies, and with it critical timorousness and dependency. They concur in approving a rigorous critical praxis that is culturally aware and autonomous; in the words of Namwar Singh, developing a "historical consciousness" that evinces "some conceptual clarity about the intersection between history and cultural production" ("Reformulating the Questions" 5). To put it differently, they want the study of the evolution of the novel form in India to be charted in terms of a time-space account; one that would both re-member the generic canon in a long overdue effort to offset and supply the critical lacunae occasioned by "cultural amnesia" (Devy 2) as well as be more keenly aware of the genre's recoding of space-time in the said context. What they call for, therefore, is a radical rethink of the contours and characteristics of the Indian novel and not necessarily, as mentioned before, the dissolution of the generic category itself. With these strictures as an expository backdrop, I turn now to the study of the form in question.

While I am quoting Devy, it should not be taken for an acceptance of his nativist stance in toto. It's best to read Devy, keeping in mind the critique offered by Debjani Ganguly, for instance, of his position in her essay "G. N. Devy: The Nativist as Postcolonial Critic." In fact for a helpful idea of some of the debates surrounding the discourse of nativism, refer to Makarand Paranjape, edited, Nativism: Essays in Criticism, in which Ganguly's work appears.
In India, as elsewhere, the novel form did not emerge *ex nihilo*. But the circumstances coeval with its formal appearance are of a slightly different order than what obtained in the West. The Indian novel did not just evolve from the mutant couplings and compulsive cross-fertilisations of the existing substrate of genres. Rather it is of a mongrel breed, in a specific sense. It is a spawn of cultural miscegenation.\(^{201}\) As suggested above, British colonial expediencies and literary influences acted as both the distant sire and immediate midwife that birthed it into hegemonic life in the literary landscape of India. This is not the same as to say, however, that the novel in India is a Western import (although it was also that, in a particular way, as will become clear later). Quite the contrary. The genetic/generic make-up of the Indian novel is far from devoid of native strains.\(^{202}\) For if, as per Ferdinand de Saussure, “the problem of the origin of language is not a different problem from that of its transformation” (as ctd. in Todorov 15), it

\(^{201}\) This statement needs to be taken with the caveat that the cultural insularity of genres might just as well be the biggest myths of literary criticism. Recent work has highlighted how simplistic assumptions of the western insularity of novel and prose fiction are inconclusive. Prose narratives travelled a circuitous route from India, the Middle East, the Mediterranean, across centuries before they found expression in the Western novel. So the complete insularity of genres could be a critical red herring. Genres could necessarily be spawns of cultural miscegenation in discreet, less obvious and meandering ways. In fact, it might be useful to approach the conundrum of genres as palimpsests: underwritten with the impress of antecedent or concurrent literary influences, themselves interworking different socio-cultural compulsions. Therefore the specificity of genres need not lie so much in the fact of their cultural and/or literary hybridity but in the particular factors of that hybridity.

\(^{202}\) See Makarand Paranjape’s *Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel*, Bhalchandra Nemade’s “Marathi Kadambari: Prerna va Swarup” available in English translation as “The Marathi Novel 1950-75” or Namwar Singh’s essay, “Reformulating the Questions” in the Meenakshi Mukherjee, ed., *Early Novels In India*. Willy-nilly they point to the different and various ideological and stylistic influences working on the novel in India. Udaya Kumar, for instance, discussing C. V. Raman’s historical novels, believes, “We need to recall that C. V.’s historical novels continue a tradition of folk narratives and ritual performances which commemorate the conflict against royalty in eighteenth century Travancore” (“Seeing and Reading” 189). Then again, more recently, in their Introduction to the translation of Pingali Suranna’s *Kalapurnodayamu* (*The Sound of the Kiss or The Story That Must Never Be Told*), Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman write, “We see this book as, in a certain sense, the first Indian novel—that is, as embodying the invention of a hitherto unknown genre, perhaps comparable in its sensibility and adventurous imagination to its roughly contemporaneous work in Europe, Cervantes’ *Quixote*, which is also often seen as the first modern European novel” (xvi). For more details on just why they consider this text to be the first “South Asian novel,” refer to the “Invitation to a Second Reading” which follows the translation of the text (167-209). Some work has also been done on pre-modern prose narratives and tellings such as *fasana, qissa* and *dastan*, among others, as indigenous influences on the Urdu novel’s development in India (for example, refer to Christina Oesterheld’s essay, “Entertainment and Reform”).
should be permissible to hold by the same logic and because genres are specific deployments of language, that the problem of the origin of a genre is not very different from that of its transformation. To explore the institution of the novel form in India then is to simultaneously engage with the issue of what Aniket Jawaare has called the “translation of genres” (73). Here, what I propose is a reading of the Indian novel as one of the nodes that imaginatively constellates the multiple, compelling desires of particular socio-political, historical and aesthetic conjunctures. Or, in other words, a provisional account of the different desires for the novel in India. Because it would be unwieldy else, I bifurcate this labour into broad studies of the early and later Indian novel, respectively.

**The Early Indian Novel**

There were two immediate reasons, generally speaking, for the appearance of the novel as a *finished* cultural artifact in India. The Western novel, both in its canonical as well as popular *avatar*, was part and parcel of the liberal shipments of “civilisation” from the metropole, assiduously offloaded on colonial shores. In this instance, I believe, looking into the particular dynamics of its importation might yield interesting results.

There is considerable journalistic evidence to suggest a general apprehension among the nineteenth century colonial administrators in India about the lack of suitable recreation for its officials. Posted far away from home, and cut adrift, as it were, from its salubrious cultural moorings, it was felt that there were very few avenues available which could engage their leisure time in a salutary manner. At the same time, there were opportunities aplenty for the indulgence of atavistic impulses and the cultivation of rebarbative pastimes frowned upon by “civilised society.” In other words, the spectre of their officers lapsing into cultural barbarity

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203 This is not to suggest that the Western novel or even the British novel had stopped evolving. But it had become a recognisable, indeed, established, genre of literary expression by the time to which reference is being made here (reinforcement of the point can be had, for instance in Chapter 6 of Geoffrey Day’s *From Fiction to the Novel*). As opposed to this, the genre had not achieved indigenous recognition in India during the same period.
and degradation (*a la* Kurtz of the *Heart of Darkness* fame?) was a very real worry for the colonial government.\(^{204}\) At the same time, the functionaries themselves feared becoming the butt of jokes back home (and these were not scarce either) regarding their provinciability, their lack of sophistication, their mofussil or worse, primitive, divertissements. As such, there was an urgent need among them to be *au courant* with the latest at home. And with the advent of the steamship, as Meenakshi Mukherjee notes in *The Perishable Empire*, this was made eminently possible, albeit with a time lag of six weeks—the minimum time that it took a steamer to traverse the distance between metropole and colony, civilisation and savagery, knowledge and nescience! As an unnamed personage enthused, in the pages of *The Calcutta Review*, “thanks to our splendid steamships ... every month brings to our shores a fresh supply of European literature, scarcely six weeks old” (as ctd. in Mukherjee, *The Perishable Empire* 5).\(^{205}\) Thus, one of the reasons that the English novel, especially of the *popular* ilk, arrived in India was as a large part of the consignment of “healthy entertainment from home” that was simultaneously invested with the responsibility of saving colonial officials from cultural degeneracy and social gaucherie. The colonial government, in fact, expended considerable time, effort and money in the import of books for the health and edification of its administrators (ref. to Joshi, “Culture and Consumption”).

The other reason for the importation of the Western novel in its ready-made form was its implication in the pedagogical undertaking as an ingenious “mask of conquest” to further entrench and perpetuate colonial paramountcy. Here, two acts are of particular importance.\(^{206}\) The first, Charter Act of 1813, was significant in

\(^{204}\) Gauri Viswanathan mentions the debauched behaviour of company officials that was consistent cause for worry for the colonial administration. See her, *Masks of Conquest*. See also Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge*.

\(^{205}\) Mukherjee has noted in some detail the evidence of such anxieties in her *The Perishable Empire*.

\(^{206}\) My selection of these two Acts is not to imply that they can be abstracted and isolated from the historical milieus of which they were a part. Rather, I pick on them as exemplary instances, as
that it made it incumbent upon the colonial government to look to the education of the native population under its charge. As Gauri Viswanathan comments, “the more far-reaching significance of the Charter Act lay in the commitment enjoined upon England to undertake the education of the native subjects, a responsibility which it did not officially bear even towards its own people[!]” (23). Henceforth there was to be an active and systematic refashioning of the pedagogical machinery to instruct the natives according to the needs and understanding of the colonial masters but as part of the necessary discharge of their moral responsibility to their subjects. However, as Viswanathan notes, the general thrust of colonial educational intervention in this phase was Orientalist and tended towards an attempt at “reverse acculturation” (Masks of Conquest 28). As such, it did not directly demand the transportation of Western Literature, and, as part of it, the English novel. For present concerns, the significance of this Act lies in the fact that it made it imperative for the colonial government to intervene in the indigenous modes and media of instruction and knowledge-production; and in more senses than one, paved the way for the promulgation of the second English Education Act of 1835, which followed closely on the heels of Macaulay’s infamous “Minute” of the same year. This later enactment was in some obvious contradistinction to its predecessor. For one, it was unequivocally Anglicist in orientation and emphasis. Its discrimination and determination of what constituted culture and civilisation, good literature, “right” values and responsibilities, and lest we forget, the realpolitik of colonial governance, led to the inceptive institutionalisation of English literature as an independent discipline of study in India. 207 This, in turn, entailed first the active and tendentious “governmental” constitution of a literary canon and subsequently its enmasse importation to and dissemination in the colonial arena. And so the Western novel with its canonical valence travelled to India.

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207 As many critics have noted, English Literature became an academic discipline in the colonies much before it gained that character in the metropolitan setting.
The Indian novel, however, had still not made its appearance in any big way. And would not do so till the first generation “schooled” by Macaulayan vision had come to maturity. To chart its particular time-space odyssey in the literary landscape of nineteenth-century India is to take cognisance of an enmeshed complex of f/actors, desires: both those that engendered it, explicitly, intentionally or otherwise, and those that were engendered by it, explicitly, intentionally or otherwise; it is to take cognisance of the novel form as an epigenetic or accretive genre, one that is an expressive locus and transcreative medium of socio-cultural, historical, political, economic, aesthetic, systemic and/or personal motivations, impulses, interests, ambitions, strategies, desires.

**When “Rhyme Gave Way to Reason”**

It requires the genius of a Virginia Woolf, perhaps, to pinpoint exactly when human nature changed. Lesser mortals must give their hypotheses of like or similar changes much wider latitude. I am merely maintaining what many others before me have observed, namely, in the nineteenth century Indian sensibilities were changing, changing, that is, rather remarkably. And the proliferation of prose was significant in this ferment, as instigation, as inspiration, as outcome.

There were several reasons for the rise to preeminence of the prose medium of expression in nineteenth-century India. Not the least among these was the ready facility of prose to be of use in consolidating colonial dominance. It would not be unreasonable, for instance, to read the aforementioned 1813 Charter as an expressive enactment of the colonial need to get a handle on the vast and unruly experience that was India. The *discovery* of India had by this time become an urgent, one might even say overriding, colonial preoccupation. Political and historical exigencies had ensured that India became an engrossing object of

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208 Critics like G. N. Devy have pointed out the existence of the stray prose narratives that are witness of native inspiration in the evolution of the genre, quite independent of Western influence.

209 And it is not always easy to tell the one from the other.

210 This remark is attributed to a Bengali writer by name of Pramatha Chaudhuri in Meenakshi Mukherjee’s *Realism and Reality* (16).
colonial investigation, reconstruction, systematisation, rationalisation and demarcation on a multiplicity of fronts. Its history, its geography, its culture, its language(s), its literature were all subjected to a detailed and enthusiastic, if somewhat interested, vivisection. And places like Fort William College and the college at Fort St. George in Madras were institutional centres explicitly set up to train colonial officials to “know” India better in order to “rule” India better. What more effective means of achieving this knowledge, of course, than translation (the translation of one civilisation chiefly for its intelligibility, use and gratification to another), and what better mode of inscribing this translation than the prose medium. Not only was a vast archive of “classical” texts

211 Interestingly, round about the same time the Hindu College was set up for the well-to-do scions of Indian families and the curriculum was completely Anglicised. This shows how in the population or a certain section of it, at least, there was already an inflated value being attached to things British. For the record, the two colleges mentioned above are not to be seen as pursuing identical goals. All I am highlighting is certain similarities.

212 Cohn’s “investigative modalities” is a useful understanding of the compulsions at stake. By highlighting the complicity of such knowledge in the facilitation and entrenchment of colonial rule, I do not mean to dismiss the very real intellectual curiosity and excitement that animated many of these Orientalist ventures. For a persuasive reading of the “dual basis” (26) of British exertions during the period, read Cohn, Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge. Read also Vasudha Dalmia’s, “Sanskrit Scholars and Pandits of the Old School” which tracks through the history of the Benares Sanskrit College, “within western ‘orientalism,’ the radical shift from awe and a certain mystification of the wisdom of the East at the end of the eighteenth century to a marginalisation of this knowledge and the degradation of the bearers of it to the position of native informants” (Orienting India 48). Robert J. C. Young, using Deleuze’s and Guattari’s articulation of the “link between capitalism, colonialism and spatiality” (170), offers another illuminating account of the dynamics of colonial desire that is to the point here. According to him, their “description of the operations of capitalism as a territorial writing machine seems not only especially suited to the historical development of industrialisation, but also describes rather exactly the violent physical and ideological procedures of colonization, deculturation and acculturation, by which the territory and cultural space of an indigenous society must be disrupted, dissolved and then reinscribed according to the needs of the apparatus of the occupying power” (169-70). As I said, know India better, to rule India better.

213 As Tejaswini Niranjana notes, translation is one of the sites on which “a complex production of the colonial subject occurs…. What is at stake here is the representation of the colonized, who need to be produced in such a manner as to justify colonial domination, and to beg for the English book by themselves” (“Translation, Colonialism and the Rise of English” 124). For more on the politics of poscolonial translation, refer, also to her “Representation, History and the Case of Translation” as well as to Bernard Cohn, Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge (53) and Susie Tharu, “The Arrangement of an Alliance” (160-80).

214 This is not to imply that all the translations undertaken were unilaterally prose productions, but only significantly so. For more details on the printed prose material that was part of curriculum at the College in Madras as well at the school level in Tamil country, refer to Stuart Blackburn’s “The Burden of Authenticity.”
identified, their cultural credentials established (one might add in retrospect rather
ham, if not highhandedly), and translated into English but, to make colonial
officials conversant with the language of the people, the "vernacular" tongues
were also sought to be "developed" at the aforementioned institutions. Prose
works in these languages, therefore, were in great demand here as prescribed
textbooks and Englishmen, as well as Indians under the supervision of
Englishmen, were variously commissioned to compose longer prose narratives
and compile anthologies answering to this pedagogical intent. There was an
institutional demand thus, apart from a governmental motive, in this earlier phase,
generally deemed Orientalist in its tone and tenor, for the greater production of
different kinds of prose literature.

The later Anglicist turn inaugurated by the Education Act of 1835 was no less
involved in its inducements to the same.215 This phase was a formidable coalition
of white supremacist and Utilitarian impulses.216 And though ostensibly inimical
to the earlier Orientalist emphases, as Bernard Cohn maintains, beneath their
surface antagonisms, the two tendencies (especially as hypostasised in
administrative measures) were substantially part of the selfsame technologies of
cultural domination.217 Later Anglicist assumptions, in fact, battened on
Orientalist information. Their campaign to conquer the "epistemological space" of
India was, as Cohn assures, firmly mounted on the back of diverse Orientalist
efforts to know India. It was an India forged and framed by Orientalist signatures

215 Its Orientalist emphasis sought the resuscitation of classical knowledge, in Persian, Arabic and
Sanskrit, while the latter privileged an English education. Similarly, it was primarily oriented
towards the British colonial officials, to help them learn the culture and language of the people
they governed and make them better administrators, while the latter was directed at the Indian
populace, to civilise them, and more importantly, to make them more amenable, even willing and
enthusiastic subjects of colonial rule.

216 Thomas Babington Macaulay's "Minute" best exemplifies both these tendencies.

217 For instance, Tejaswini Niranjana notes that "the famous Orientalist's [William Jones] attempt
to reveal the former greatness of India often manifests itself as the British or European task of
translating and thereby purifying the debased native texts. This Romantic Orientalist project slides
almost imperceptibly into the Utilitarian, Victorian enterprise of 'improving' the natives through
English education" (Rethinking English 130). Refer also, for corroboration, to Susie Tharu's
essay, "The Arrangement of an Alliance" (160-80).
that was derided, and vis-à-vis which the Anglicists pitted British cultural and
civilisational superiority. It was with these convictions as much as to realise the
other more politically strategic Macaulayan agenda, namely “to form a class who
may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of
persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals,
and in intellect” (130) that an English education was determined upon as a means
of “improving” the natives. But even here, as Susie Tharu points out, despite
energetically promoting an English education, colonial administrators never lost
sight of the fact that the ultimate aim was to replace this with an education in the
vernacular languages (“The Arrangement of an Alliance” 163). That it was not
deemed immediately practical was owing to the rudimentary condition of native
languages currently in use. Their meagre resources were considered quite
inadequate to the demands of the liberal humanist curriculum favoured by the
British. As such education through the medium of English was introduced as a
stopgap arrangement till the indigenous languages under a tutelary British
influence was made fit to be taught. Not surprisingly, all these policy changes in
practice demanded a massive mediation and production of prose compositions:
this later phase, in fact, not only encouraged the dissemination of English prose
but also promoted the development of prose writings in native languages.

The governmental fillip to the general currency of prose in India found a
somewhat fortuitous and uncertain ally in a wide range of missionary activities

218 Macaulay admits as much:
I have no knowledge of either Sanscrit [sic] or Arabic. But I have done what I could
to form a correct estimate of their value. I have read translations of the most
celebrated Arabic and Sanscrit works. I have conversed both here and at home with
men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. I am quite ready to
take the Oriental learning at the valuation of the Orientalists themselves. I have never
found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library
was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of
the Western literature is, indeed, fully admitted by those members of the Committee
who support the Oriental plan of education. (123)

219 An education in Sanskrit or Arabic/Persian was deemed to be ill suited because, immoral,
impractical, irrational, esoteric, other-worldly and too erotic, among other things.
undertaken more or less concurrently. Although often at loggerheads in their expressed and acknowledged teleologies, the two nonetheless recognised the importance of language in deciding matters of influence, whether political or theological. For the latter as for the former effective dominion and/or prosletysation depended upon effective communication. Missionaries thus dedicated themselves to many activities considered imperative for the success of their religious crusade. These ranged from the translation of Biblical and other English works deemed of pious content into indigenous languages to the compilation and systematisation of grammars and dictionaries in these very languages to facilitate the work of translation, from the composition of suitably tendentious prose to the collection of moral-instructive anthologies, etc. Not surprisingly, missionaries were also among the earliest people involved in the setting up of printing presses.

These very powerful imperial and theological stimuli combined with the growth of print journalism; the spurt in periodicals and newspapers and ipso facto journalistic reports, articles, essays; the greater availability of printed textbooks; the setting up of book societies and printing presses; the increasing number of public libraries and reading rooms; the expansion in a literate enthusiastic readership; the Evangelical distrust of poetry as fallacious and immoral; as well as the Utilitarian dismissal of poetry as useless, in a part aleatory concert to put a hitherto unknown premium on the prosaic medium of expression. Prose also won out because historical sensibilities in India were undergoing a radical reformation: in the clash of Chronos and Kairos evolutionary time triumphed over revolutionary time. History with a telos obscured cyclical mythopoeic measures

Sir William Carey, Professor at Fort William College was a missionary. He set up a printing press at Serampore. John Marshman was also at the Fort William College and was a missionary. He started a bangla newspaper, the first in the language in fact. G. S. Gurney, another missionary, wrote Kamini Kanta, claimed to be the first novel in Assamese. According to S. Jayasrinivasa Rao “the earliest attempts to write novels in Kannada took the form of translations by missionaries.” He goes on to catalogue some of these in his essay, “Novel in Kannada” (43). And so on.

For a brief overview of missionary role in the setting up of printing presses in India, refer to Babu K Vergese’s article, “From Palm Leaves to the Printed Word.”
and the narratives of this History, privileged as veridic discourse, were exclusively prosaic in post-enlightenment colonial and modern thought. In other words it was a time when rhyme was giving way to reason on a variety of fronts and reason during this time chose prose as its favoured medium of expression.\textsuperscript{222}

This somewhat dilatory disquisition on the popularity of prose is perhaps permissible only because even in today’s eristic academic set-up, it would be granted that the novel is, by and large, a longish prose work of creative content. Before the advent of this narrative genre, the Indian literary imagination had predominantly expressed itself in the poetic mode.\textsuperscript{223} While I have tried to provide an indexical compendium of the general conditions that were conducive for the emergence of this narrative form, what I attempt now is to unravel some way the “tangled process” (Mukherjee, \textit{Early Novel in India} viii) that more directly urged, demanded and orchestrated the coming into being of the Indian novel. To the extent that my concern is genealogical, I must once again take recourse to the spade and shovel, metaphorically speaking, for a little historical excavation becomes quite unavoidable.

With regard to the development of the novel form I agree in principle and up to a certain point with Meenakshi Mukherjee that “the process was diverse and heterogeneous even within the country, depending on the specific historical variables, cultural geography and narrative genealogy of each linguistic region” (Mukherjee, \textit{Early Novel in India} viii). Nonetheless, I will be trying to understand the emergence of the novel as a pan-India phenomenon within a suitably extensive framework because I also believe that while the “variables” are by no

\textsuperscript{222} Dipesh Chakrabarty calls this new sensibility introduced and encouraged by colonial rule, “historicism.” For more details, refer to his essay, “Globalisation, Democratisation and Evacuation of History?” (\textit{At Home in Diaspora} 129).

\textsuperscript{223} But this is not to say that prose expression itself did not exist in India. While admittedly not pervasive, military and historical chronicles and certain religious commentaries, hagiographies were inscribed as prose compositions. Also, shorter tales and stories, folklore, existed in the prose medium. For greater details, refer to the different essays in the Stuart Blackburn and Vasudha Dalmia, ed., \textit{India’s Literary History}. Perhaps, what can be said was nothing of the length and exact type of the realist novel pre-existed in India.
means insignificant, diversity must not be confused with irreducible and absolute heterogeneity. The impressive inventories of differences notwithstanding, there are enough overlaps, similarities, and reduplications of contexts, motivations and responses that argue for the viability of a pan-Indian reading of the novel form in the nineteenth century. As Aijaz Ahmad observes, in another context, “the ‘national’ literature of India finds its principle of unity not in linguistic uniformity but in civilizational moorings and cultural ethos...” (In Theory 256, 255). Indeed, Mukherjee herself admits as much, when she writes, “Despite obvious regional variations, a basic pattern seems to emerge from shared factors like the puranic heritage, hierarchical social structure, colonial education, disjunction of agrarian life and many others that affect the form of a novel as well as its contents” (Realism and Reality viii).

The novel in India first began making its appearance in notable numbers around the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Localised in its initial phase to urban centres of colonial rule, its presence soon became tangible across linguistic, regional and communo-religious boundaries towards the end of the nineteenth century. My attempt, as mentioned before, is to read the emergence and popularity of this form, here, as being under- and overwritten by an admixture of subterranean and surface desires that are not just heterogeneously moving but also convergently active and effective. To give my analysis greater coherence and focus, I will be ordering and fixing this fluid plethora of desires within a broad schematic that sees the novel perform a variety of roles, answer a variety of calls, accommodate a variety of needs and serve as a means of rich and variegated personal, systemic, creative, communal, religious, conformist and non-conformist wish fulfilments. This notational exercise is not intended to be exhaustive; it is only provisional.

1. The Desire for Improvement: professional, material, personal and cultural

... the passion for English knowledge has penetrated the most obscure, and extended to the most remote parts of India. The steam boats, passing up and down the Ganges, are boarded by native boys, begging, not for money, but for books... Some gentlemen coming to Calcutta were astonished at the eagerness with which they were pressed for books by a troop of boys, who boarded the steamer from an obscure place, called Comercolly. A Plato was lying on the table, and one of the party asked
a boy whether that would serve his purpose. "Oh yes," he exclaimed, give me any book." The gentleman at last hit upon the expedient of cutting up an old Quarterly Review, and distributing the articles among them.

—Charles Trevelyan (On the Education of the People of India)

It would be easy if the above could be dismissed as the baseless effusions of a prejudiced mindset. Unfortunately, that is not quite possible. In fact, the valorisation of Western knowledge and, especially, English literature as part of it, was one of the earliest, pervasive, and, dare one say, enduring successes of colonialism in India. Evidence of this is to be had as early as 1817, in the setting up of the Hindu College championed by a select group of well-to-do, upper caste Indians. I do not intend to rehearse here that history of Indian cultural capitulation; it has been documented, both extensively and intensively, by numerous scholars already. I allude to it only insofar as it might clarify the investment of the novel form as a measure of achievement/s, insofar as it might help locate in the writing of the early Indian novel, the desire for improvement. 225

The juggernaut of British colonialism had forcefully flattened Indian culture into a sub-culture—with all its attendant connotations of being substandard and of being subsumed within the larger mainstream and standard western culture. Having translated political subjugation into cultural subordination, it was but natural that the projected model for cultural exchange was one of unidirectional flows: British patronage and tutelage, on the one hand and Indian imitation and improvement, on the other. It is in the light of these assimilationist interactions—interactions that pitted acculturation into a superior civilisation against

225 This word itself has an Enlightenment and missionary baggage, such that its use in the context of colonial India indicates the latter's cultural subsidence. For an important angle on the politics of the novel form as this culturally translated on colonial soil, see Paranjape, "The Ideology of Form," where among other things, he says:

the form of the novel is not just a determined artifact, but itself a powerful embodiment of the dominant culture with which it is aligned, and hence instrumental in the forces of determination. This works both in the society in which the novel is produced and in the society to which it exported. Particularly in the latter, it becomes aligned with the forces of colonialism.... the novel [that is] as a powerful epistemological category which lends authority and prestige to certain ideologies of reality. (Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel 26)
deracination from a decadent one—I see the novel steadily gain as a symbol of accomplishment.

As mentioned before, until recently, the novel was accepted as an unequivocally and exclusively Western genre of literary creativity. Its presence in other cultures was seen as facilitated through transplantation or importation. This perception was definitely not uncommon in nineteenth-century literate India. And what it ensured was that any Indian novelistic venture would dominantly be seen as imitative or derivative at best, to quote Paranjape, as "tied to the apron strings of its Western progenitors" (*Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel* 80).

Be that as it may, the actual availability of the English novel, both in its popular and highbrow manifestations, quickened the desire for emulation among Indians. Nothing to wonder at, this, given its perceived affiliations. In fact, the novel as the most popular form of literary production in the latter half of the nineteenth century, came to conflate in itself the aura of culture, genius, erudition and expertise. Writing a novel thus (even reading one perhaps) was often a means of sharing in these: of garnering a slice of reflected glory (the only kind that is possible for a subject people within dominant paradigms); of enhancing one's self esteem; of announcing one's superior credentials to be counted amongst the cultured and sophisticated of the world. Identified as closely as it was with the socio-cultural ethos of the rulers, the novel (the writing of one, that is) was a useful means of ingratiating oneself with the powers that were; after all, imitation still is the highest form of flattery! In other words, the novel often substituted as a calling card that not only distinguished the author from the unregenerate natives as a person of learning, intelligence and imagination, but also negotiated her/his introduction to superior western society. What's more, quite apart from being a facilitator of professional and/or social advancement, the novel also held out the lure of material benefits. In fact, quite a few of the early Indian novels—both in English and in other Indian languages—were written as entries for competitions
announced by colonial authorities; competitions that often carried cash prizes. Thus, in more ways than one, the novel condensed powerful enticements and stoked the prize-winning urges of the Indian people. It dangled the promise of multiple rewards in its undertaking and, as history is witness, an eager and motley school of comprador fish took the bait.

2. The Desire for Assertion

As everybody knows there are fish, and there are fish! Some swallow the offered bait hook, line and sinker; some get hooked but fight free (often to die anyway), some only nibble at the bait circumspectly, take what is in it for their own sustenance and go their own way and to other deaths; and some, of course, ignore the bait and still die. The fish that interest me here are the ones that took the colonial bait—the more or less, and differently, desirous fish of the first three categories.

If improvement via imitation was a powerful magnet that drew people to the business of writing novels, then the desire for control was a no less urgent spur.

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226 On the British side the desire to get these novels written can be traced to the favourable light in which British rule is cast in them. As Paranjape says, "such literature was useful in conveying the impression that the Raj was benign and beneficial to the natives. That is to say, the British ruled not so much through coercion but consent" (from an unpublished essay on Sevantibai Nikambe’s *Ratanbai*).

227 The presence of numerous texts that are conscious "imitations," adaptations, or transcreations of English novels testify to these investments. Illustrious novelists in their own rights were not averse to such borrowings. Bankim, Chandu Menon, and many others can be adduced as instantiations of the above. The practice of juxtaposing quotations from canonical and popular authors also attests this influence. Critics such as Mukherjee, Paranjape, and others have dealt with the phenomenon at greater length. For more details, look to their works cited above. Reference here is to the colonial governmental instigation to write novels as textbooks for school and college curricula. Or the colonial governmental announcements of competitions for best novels written with cash prizes as rewards. These novels, incidentally, were judged on the scale of approximation: the closer to Western realist novels, the better, thus further encouraging imitation. For details on detective novels as imitation, see Francesca Orsini’s "Detective Novel." Moreover, this is not just true for novels in English but also in other Indian languages. What I am suggesting is that the form itself was so identified, that its undertaking in any language would bear the imprint of these influences.

228 This is not to suggest that they were more or less colonised than others who did not write novels, but only to point out that they were often complicit insofar as they were competing for the rewards of colonialism rather than otherwise.
Priya Joshi, in her analysis of the consumption pattern of Indian novel readers in the nineteenth century, concludes that the persistent popularity of the melodramatic and the romantic in the face of official censure is because these "narratives assuaged ... their dreams" ("Reading in the Public Eye" 319). I do not think that it is far-fetched to educe similar motivations at work in the writing of numerous historical romances and Utopian fantasies. In fact, these extravagant flights into distant times and/or topoi did not just constitute narrative strategies of coping with an emasculated present by escaping into realms that afforded a measure of control and order; they were also complexly mediated inscriptions of creative assertion: personal, social, national, communal, cultural, etc. With considerable acuity, Meenakshi Mukherjee understands the proliferation of historical romances thus:

First, contact with European literature suddenly opened out for the educated Indian a whole new world of imagination, humanism and triumph of self over hierarchical society. But life the middle-class Indian in the nineteenth century was limited, hedged in by social restrictions and politically servile. Therefore the Indian creative writer often turned to a more expansive past where human beings seemed to be of a larger stature, where valour and heroism counted, and where glory and splendour seemed infinite. Second, the so-called historical novel could be fitted more easily into the traditional concept of storytelling than realistic fiction of the western variety. Daastan, kisse, tilism were popular narrative and the cycles of legends borrowed and adapted from Persian were available in most Indian languages. These stories usually dealt with adventure, chivalry, magic and love, and were dominated by heroes of invincible courage.... Moreover, adaptation of episodes from the epic and the puranas was an accepted literary practice in the modern Indian languages.... Third, any past, historical or otherwise, was better than the miserable present, and the wonder-evoking through unreal happenings of a bygone era were an anodyne to the miseries of present existence.... Finally, the framework of history afforded the novelist a way to glorify the past, and the past, however nebulous, meant the pre-British past: any tale of past bravery or heroism vindicated present servitude. This was the safest form a newly awakened nationalism could take. (Realism and Reality 45-46)

It was not just historical romances, though, that mediated different kinds of desire for self-determination. For instance, the genre of the detective novel or the jasusi upanyas again negotiates the tricky business of worldviews in flux. Generic conventions here demand that the unreal, the fantastic, be eschewed. Realism of detail becomes de rigeur. However, at the same time that the genre realises a capitulation to the dictates of Enlightenment Reason, it also, in the figure of the
detective, affords a vicarious experience of self-sufficiency and control.\(^{229}\) Similarly social novels though nominally and categorically "realist," nonetheless juxtapose realistic techniques with stylistic devices from classical and folk repertoires of aesthetic representation.\(^{230}\) Furthermore, these novels are firmly embedded in the debates that exercised those times. Living within the alienating matrix of colonial modernity precipitated severe identity crises in the Indian psyche as pre-capitalist modes of social alignments and inter-personal arrangements were subjected to radical restructuring. Traditional hierarchies were unsettled and in this social churning there was scope for older identities to be refashioned and consolidated, for newer identities to be constituted. And the social novels contributed to this ferment as participants that authored and contested different, sometimes overlapping identities.

Looking back, the single most dominant of these assertions, probably, was on behalf of a national identity. The novel was undeniably pressed into service reprising the political rhetoric of modernity as *bildungsromans* of the Indian nation (in its nascent state, novels generally took recourse to locating such affinities in a pre-British past; as nationalist sentiments gathered strength later on, novels discarded this artifice and dealt with the subject more directly). However, it is a convenient reductionism to read the early Indian novels, after Jameson, only and always "as national allegories." As Dilip Menon reminds us, there are other "frame[s] of interpretation" that are equally, if not more, applicable and productive, in engaging with early Indian novels.\(^{231}\) For present purposes, suffice it to say, that the early Indian novels were imaginative and complex inscriptions

\(^{229}\) For a nuanced reading of the different ways in which detective novels that were "translated" and "adapted" function, see Francesca Orsini, "Detective Novels."

\(^{230}\) Chandu Menon’s tropical extravaganza in describing his heroine’s beauty in the eponymous novel *Indulekha* is only the most celebrated and apodictic instance of such stylistic syncretism and narrative hybridity. Evidence of it, however, in greater or lesser degree, can be found in almost all the novels written during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

\(^{231}\) For details, refer to his essay, “A Place Elsewhere.” According to Menon, one of the frames is "that the early Indian novel was concerned centrally with the question of the fashioning of the modern self and new forms of community, and that these themes were, very often, thought through within the idiom of religion" (484).
of the need, the urge, the desire to assert a measure of control in multiple intersecting domains—personal, domestic, aesthetic, socio-cultural, communoreligious, caste, and/or national—of habitation and activity; a desire for self-definition that was shot through with the anxiety for survival.

3. The Desire to Reform

According to Frederic Jameson,

... the novel plays a significant role in what can be called a properly bourgeois cultural revolution—that immense process of transformation whereby populations whose life habits were formed by other, now archaic, modes of production are now reprogrammed for life and work in the new world of market capitalism. The “objective” function of the novel is thereby also implied: to its subjective and critical, analytic, and corrosive mission must now be added the task of producing as though for the first time the very life world, that very “referent”—the newly quantifiable space of extension and market equivalence, the new rhythms of measurable time, the new secular and “disenchanted” object world of the commodity system, with its post-traditional daily life and its bewildering empirical, “meaningless” and contingent Umwelt—of which the new narrative discourse will then claim to be the “realistic” reflection. (The Political Unconscious 152)

It is not a concern here to argue for the accuracy or otherwise of Jameson’s analysis vis-à-vis the early Indian novel. I quote this extract only because it underscores the inextricable implication of the genre in question, especially in its early stages of development, in the discourses of social reform. In India, as mentioned before, the novel made its debut under the auspices of a colonial modernity, itself contingent, as Paranjape observes, on “the ruse” that “colonialism is ‘enlightening.’” (in an unpublished essay on Sevantibai Nikambe’s Ratanbai). Such was the currency of this idea that not only British colonial officials and missionaries but also the assorted Indian intelligentsia enthusiastically clambered on to the bandwagon of Melioration. And the novel, especially of the social sort, with its partiality for realism and contemporaneity, was in some ways tailor-made for the reformist temper of the times.

But here, too, it is not enough to affirm this and probe no further, since there are numerous shades to the motivations that essay these novels. For purposes of clarity it will be convenient, once again, to interpret these (the motivations, that
is) by gauging the quality and density of novelistic engagement with the exigent issues of the times.

Even a passing acquaintance with nineteenth century social debates is enough to identify education, religion, caste and gender organisation, marital rights and relations, etc., as some of the subjects that most insistently exercised the contemporary minds of the period. However since these were not hermetic domains appealing to separate constituencies, what is witnessed around them is a concentration of overlapping and competing desires—desires that contest each other and these sites even as they constitute or reconstitute them. For instance, the subject of education for women was treated extensively in innumerable novels. But the desire for reform that animates them is neither homogeneous nor consistent. It varies according to the social location of the author in the grid of power relations and the degree of self-conscious determination that inspires the venture in the first place. So for an author primarily concerned, say, with expanding the ecumenical reach of Christianity through conversion, or formulating a modern national, communal, caste and/or class identity, the issue of women's education appeals only instrumentally as a means to an end. Indulekha\(^{232}\) is about the superior virtues of an educated woman, but her education is of a kind that answers to the specific needs of a matrilineal Nair community in transition. Indulekha is the kind of woman that would help modernise this community without compromising its identity. She is the kind of woman that would cleanse the infamy and slur attached to Nair marital practices in a predominantly patriarchal social milieu by judiciously facilitating, nay demanding a shift to the only kind of marital model sanctioned by colonial modernity\(^{233}\): companionate, monogamous (the interdictions are chiefly directed

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\(^{232}\) This novel was written with the express aim of reproducing the experience of an English novel in Malayalam, so that the author's wife could enjoy it. It targets a specifically female audience and melds the motives of entertainment and "education."

\(^{233}\) In the words of Udaya Kumar, Indulekha, and several other Nair reform novels—especially from Malabar in the 1890's—actively engage with the reforms proposed by the Malabar Marriage Commission. While Chandu Menon's interventions as a member of the Commission
against the sexual promiscuity of Nair women in *sambandham* relations), patrilineal and virilocally.

Then again, colonial power had a stake in encouraging, institutionally and materially, reform-oriented novels that canvassed for the education of women because they performed, rather well, the dubious task of projecting colonial rule as a civilising mission—a mission that is benevolent, enlightened and concerned to improve the condition of the culturally degraded colonial woman. Nazir Ahmad's *The Bride's Mirror*, or *Mirat Ul Arus* in the original Urdu, is a case in point, both for the pecuniary rewards that followed for the author of the novel and the merger of interest between indigenous reform and foreign rule. Its exemplary illustration of the benefits of the "right" education for women is interspersed with blandishments to Queen Victoria and English mothers whose love for their children is "tempered with reason," unlike the "mad fondness like that of mothers here" (143).  

can be seen as opposing legal reform from outside the community, his novel tries to redefine the affective meaning of the Nair marriage or *sambandham*. The freedom of Nair women to annul one marriage and to engage in another, according to Indulekha, indicates a degree of freedom which women anywhere in the world would find enviable. However, this freedom is accompanied by a responsibility not to abuse it for sensual gratification—hence the need for restraint and discrimination at the very origin of desire.

On the specific features of the "autonomy" that is the "new kind of female subjectivity" which Indulekha stands for, he writes, "the signs which indicate this subject are primarily English education in combination with a new awareness and reverence for the Indian classical traditions" ("Two Figures of Desire" 136).

For instance, in 1868, the Government of the Northwest Frontier Provinces offered prizes for works that might be appropriate from a pedagogical standpoint. The stipulations to be considered eligible were, "that the book shall subserv some useful purpose of instruction, entertainment or mental discipline; that it shall be written in one or other of the current dialects, Oordoo or Hindee [sic] and that there shall be excellence both in style and treatment.... Books suitable for the women of India will be especially acceptable, and well rewarded." (as qtd. in Nairn, "Prize Winning *Adab*" 292-293; emphasis added).

The novel was written, by the author’s own admission, from a desire to provide suitable and morally instructive reading material for his daughters, one which should improve their ideas and correct their habits in respect of those affairs which a woman encounters in her daily life, and in which, by reason of their romantic notions, or through ignorance or perversity, so many women are overtaken by disaster and sorrow, and yet which should be in a form sufficiently attractive to prevent their being discouraged or dismayed by its perusal. (Preface 2)
I hope this adequately instantiates the point sought to be made—that the treatment of the same theme could be different according to the different desires that moved the authors, either consciously or inadvertently. It could range from being tangential to direct, from being superficial and patchy to in-depth and sustained, from being traditionally recuperative to socially and culturally heterodox. Furthermore, the same work could coalesce different seemingly disparate desires. And there is enough evidence to suggest that this is not just true with regard to the vexed issue of women’s education but is equally applicable to the various other issues that attracted didactically inclined novelistic ventures during the nineteenth century.

4. The Desire for Detailing

On the one hand, this desire as it shaped novels can be traced to the urgent imperial need to “know” India, and on the other, to the institution of Enlightenment reason as the final arbiter and touchstone in deciding epistemological issues. Empiricism, a certain positivist teleology, an emphasis on detail and detailing, observation, an objective understanding of the world, etc., were all part of the changing historical sensibilities, at least of the “educated” people, of nineteenth-century India. And an amalgam of both these desires pushed the novel—a prose narrative of some length and generic facility for realist representation—towards adopting the artifice of history, even as the domains of fact and fiction, reason and imagination continued to be sharply polarised in “official” and “informed” discourse. According to T. W. Clark, “it became more

This novel was framed by the recommendations of high-placed officials of the Raj such as, the "Nobly Descended, Most Learned of the Learned, M. Kempson, Sahib Bahadur, Director of Instruction, North West Provinces" and "Gracious Lord of Exalted Titles, Navab Sir William Muir Sahib Bahadur, K.C.S.I., Lieutenant Governor, North West Provinces" (Ahmad, The Bride's Mirror 200, 201). The former’s recommendation begins with the admission that “the arrival of this book brought me great happiness, because this book is the composition of a worthy and highly accomplished servant of the Government,” and ends with the conviction that “it’s impossible that it won’t be beneficial for the education of women” (The Bride's Mirror 200-01). The government’s ordering 2,000 lithographed copies of the work to be printed as well recommending its inclusion in academic curricula can be further adduced as instances of colonial institutional support and patronage.
virtuous to write a school textbook on geography or hygiene than to produce a work of the imagination, and even imaginative works were put out under the smokescreen of reformist propaganda and attached to resounding moral homilies” (77). What resulted was a clutch of Indian novels that were not only patently didactic but which in their quest for greater credibility simulated and/or fused diverse modes of literary authentication, such as historiography, biography, journalistic reportage, essay- and travelogue-writing, and the first person narrative. The number of novels either eponymously titled after the protagonist, usually a woman, or with the word charitra in their titles attest this trend, quite apart from the inordinate interest in the role and place of women in society. In fact, Mirza Muhammad Hadi Ruswa, the celebrated author of Umrao Jan Ada, says as much: “My novels should be regarded as a history of our times, and I hope it will be found a useful one” (as ctd. in Clark 133).

There was a resounding mandate thus for contemporary and “realist” narratives as against an excessively stylized, meretricious prose inspired by the liminal realms where myth and history merge. This is as much to be seen in Bankim’s concern to strike a judicious balance between the rival claims of sadhu bhasha and chalit bhasha, as in O. Chandu Menon’s declaration of support for the superior claims of narrative verisimilitude:

Before the European style of oil painting began to be known and appreciated in this country, we had—painted in defiance of all possible existence—pictures of Vishnu as half man and half lion ... pictures of the god Krishna with his legs twisted and turned into postures in which no biped could stand.... Such productions used to be highly thought of, and those who produced them were highly remunerated, but now they are looked upon by many with aversion. A taste has set in for pictures, whether in oil or water colours, in which shall be delineated men, beasts and things according to their true appearance, and the closer that a picture is to nature, the greater is the honour paid to the artist. Just in the same way, if stories composed of incidents true to natural life and attractively and gracefully written, are once introduced, then by degrees the old order of books, filled with the impossible and the supernatural, will change, yielding place to the new. (Preface, Indulekha xiii-xiv)

236 To name a few of these: H. Dutt, Lieut. Suresh Biswas: His Life and Adventures; Sevantibai Nikambe, Ratanbai: A Sketch of Bombay High Caste Hindu Wife; Krupabai Sattianadhan, Kamala: A Story of Hindu Life and Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life, etc.
Furthermore, distinct from the desire to inscribe “realism,” the urge to reform and influence by engaging with the lived reality of the times, it is also perhaps true, as Paranjape notes, that these ethnographic narratives were moved by the need to register, for generations to come, a way of life that was changing rapidly. He, in fact, detects a hint of nostalgia in these narratives that not only changed but also commemorated. Interpreting Sevantibai Nikambe’s \textit{Ratanbai}, he writes:

\begin{quote}
... it takes great pains almost lovingly to describe the integral features of upper caste Maharashtrian life including ceremonies such as \textit{mangalagauri} and the ceremonial taking of each others’ names by a married couple, the \textit{maher-sasar} politics, and so on. Such descriptions, with their very imperative to record and therefore preserve for posterity a way of life, suggest, in fact, a very clear understanding of the forces of history. Sevantibai was well-aware that she was living through times of tremendous change and transition and the Hindu society that she was describing was fast changing before her very eyes. Her attempt to record, document, and even celebrate this way of life may not be signs of her conservativeness, but instead a subtle acknowledgement on her part that these ways were unsustainable under the onslaught of modernity. (unpublished article on Nikambe’s \textit{Ratanbai})
\end{quote}

And if these motivations towards documentary novels still required some reinforcement, they found it in the very real stake, as mentioned before, that colonialism had in encouraging these narratives. For the white man these novelists did the work of native informants: their works, saturated with customary details, served as an archive of anthropological value, making sense, introducing, glossing, producing knowledge about a strange people, an inscrutable culture for imperial consumption. Hence the energetic exhortations, explicit interdictions and lavish encomiums that characterised official patronage of Indian literary ventures.

\section*{5. The Desire to Communicate}

It was not just because of the desires for advancement, improvement, reform, translation, self-assertion, documentation, commemoration, or as a complex aesthetic mediation of cultural survival, that the novel in India flourished. It was also an outlet for the desire to communicate.

Broadly speaking, nineteenth century India is characterised by debate, a particular form of debate, that is. With the advent of print journalism and an “enlightened” liberal humanist consciousness, came the establishment of a “public sphere” that
at least nominally was secular, and depended on a revolution in communication media.237 Granted that this secularism foundered principally on the rocks of colonialism and cultural incongruity. Nonetheless, it democratized debate to the extent that it loosened traditional strongholds of hieratic and princely control over discourses of power. The public sphere was, at least on paper, open to anyone to debate—anyone that is literate; English of course was the language of privilege here but literacy in indigenous languages also sufficed for inclusion in the ambit of enfranchisement it extended. That this set in new forms of social stratifications and exclusion is undeniable, but it is equally true that in the existent framework, it allowed at least a few of the many customarily “voiceless”238 sections of society access to heretofore tabooed modes of social intervention. As such it is no surprise to find, what Hans Harder calls, a “communicative need” at work then: an imperative to understand, observe, create and express in all its complexity, in all its detail, in all its discontinuities, the experiences of radical realignment (“The Modern Babu and the Metropolis” 393).

The novel, as mentioned before, answered this need rather well. It was flexible in length. It was predominantly prosaic (and hence a reasonable choice). It was not, for all its pretensions, disciplinarily historical (or like any other informed discourse of knowledge that required formal training and institutional sanction for its formulation). It was a work of the imagination, creative but credible. Linguistically, the only injunction was to approximate as much as possible to forms of daily speech; once again, there was no need for any kind of specialised

237 Refer, for instance, to Vasudha Dalmia, The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions, for an account of the formation of the public sphere through the developments in Hindi language and literature (222-337).

238 It’s ironic but what was silenced in this new dispensation was precisely the oral culture against which modern literacy established its hegemony like never before. To say this is not to romanticise orality, however. As Sumit Sarkar reminds in his discussion of Ramakrishna, the interpenetrations of literacy and orality are complex, especially, in a culture like that of Hinduism, which has had a literate elite for well over two thousand years, but which still tried till the late eighteenth century to keep its most sacred texts in purely oral form. Orality here in fact became an instrument of high-caste domination: Ramakrishna could have relatively easy access to “high” knowledge, despite poverty and lacks of formal education, as he happened to be of Brahman birth. (318)
aesthetic expertise in rhythm, meter, tropicality and/or other complicated conventions. And it was the perfect form for an individualistic ethic: all it required was authenticity of presentation in dealing with quotidian, subjective, interpersonal and social experiences. As a sort of publication of privacy, thus, it is understandable that, comparatively speaking, the novel should appear to be the most user-friendly of genres. Accordingly, not a few people who might have balked at the idea of attempting any other form of literary composition eagerly tried their hand at novel-writing. And some of these first-timers were women.

Traditionally, gender norms had severely curtailed the participation of “respectable” women in the learned literary cultures of the land. The novel with its move towards interiorisation, its enthronement of the “chronotope of the family” founded “in a reciprocity of desire which is oriented towards gendered interiority as opposed to the loveless arrangements” (Udaya Kumar as ctd. in Menon, “No, Not the Nation” 65) of earlier domesticity brought women center-stage thematically, and along with all its other attributes, it also appealed generically to the authors in women. As long as bounds of gendered morality and decency were not breached, women as novelists found enthusiastic government patronage, as also, male reformist support. They wanted to, and were encouraged to, communicate their experiences of contemporary social arrangements (their testimony being open to cooptation and redeployment by competing hegemonies along various lines).

239 Dilip Menon calls it a “do-it-yourself form that came from the West without any instructions” (India’s Literary History 484). Whether it was that or not is highly debatable, but that it appeared to be something similar is what I am arguing here. In fact, for a counter view to Menon’s on modern aesthetics, refer to Sudipta Kaviraj in Literary Cultures in History. Among other things, he says, “as the literary world was given over to prose, and an underlying commonsense scientific criterion came to govern prose writing, literature gained at once a more restricted and a more exalted place. Literature could no longer happen unexpectedly and anywhere: it became highly formalized, prized, precious precisely because it was made the subject of an increasingly specialized profession…” (548).

240 Read Nancy Armstrong’s Desire and Domestic Fiction for the gender dynamics of the genre in the context of the British novel.

241 For example, consider the praise won by Swarnakumari Debi from her English friend, E. M. Lang: “Mrs Ghosal, with all her progressive ideas, still preserves the dignified tranquility of the
Embedded somewhere in this desire to communicate is also the urge to create. Not for nothing, after all, is it called the art of communication even today. But as Dilip Menon notes, “the artifice of translation and its abandonment mediates the act of creation.... anxiety of influence has been disowned and rendered as an anxiety generated by originality, of the sheer temerity of being a literary innovator” (India’s Literary History 495). And what allowed full scope to the playing out of this subterfuge was, to use Meenakshi Mukherjee’s pithy phrase, the “intransigence of realism to reality.” Many Indian novelists set out to imitate and ended up creating: of these, some abandoned their initial aim to consciously innovate, while others persevered and created almost inadvertently. Gubbi Murugaradhyaya, a Kannada novelist, illustrates one aspect of this predicament perfectly in the preface to his Shringarachaturyollasini, when he writes:

I first thought of translating an English “novel” into Kannada. When I first read a few English novels and pondered over them, there were some issues which were not in accordance with our Hindu maryade (law/rule/custom). I had to abandon this attempt. Then I thought of writing one our well-known purana verse histories in prose. But then I would have to abandon the maryade of the English novel. Therefore, I imagined a story which would allow me to write a new kind of narrative keeping the Hindu maryade intact and at the same time allowing me to follow the principles of the English novel. (as ctd. in Rao “Novel in Kannada” 50)

purdah nashin lady; brilliant as she is in the eyes of her countrymen, flattered as she has been, she never asserts herself nor gives an opinion unasked....” Teresa Hubel, in whose work the extract has been cited, goes on to comment.

In Lang’s representation of her ... Swarnakumari’s style emerges as the site of the coalescence of cultures. She is made to personify two different and, arguably, contradictory value-systems. At one and the same time, she is the so-called traditional Hindu woman who is distinguishable from other women in the world by her dedication to her husband, dead or alive, as well as the new Indian woman, who following the example set by the women of the West, is able to win international acclaim for herself and her people. We hear in his approval of such a combination in an Indian woman both the Orientalist and liberal strains of imperialist discourse. The former valorizes her efforts to preserve her culture in her own person and the latter applauds her ability to transcend it... (“The High Caste Hindu Woman as a Site of Contest in Imperialist/Nationalist India” 138)

For a reading of the ambivalent nationalist response and co-optation of Swarnakumari, as well as her own self-representation, refer to the essay (138-40).

242 This anxiety of originality, apart from being ascribed to the low self-esteem of a subject people, can also be understood in light of the fact that the emphasis on originality was never a strong feature of earlier Indian artistic traditions. Quite the contrary: finding anonymity in particular traditions or famous predecessors, even, can be called the norm.
That brings to a close my sketch of the "demand" for the early Indian novel. By the end of the nineteenth century, this form had achieved growing acceptance as a mode of creative expression. And well into the early decades of the twentieth century, its reach and popularity continued to spread along more or less similar lines. Important changes, however, did impact the genre’s course thereafter. And in what follows, it is these that I attempt to briefly highlight under the rubric of the later Indian novel.

The Later Indian Novel

If the early Indian novel emerged and developed within the matrix of colonial modernity, then the later novel, as I understand it, comes to grow with India’s Independence. For this event inaugurated a paradigm shift that willy-nilly wrote itself into the novel’s track record. Mind you, I say so without either making of the date an absolute watershed, or of the event a singular experience. Before this raises hackles and jeers alike in informed quarters, let me also quickly swear on my Holy Spivak, the subaltern doesn’t write ... novels ... at least in India. Here, as indeed I would imagine elsewhere, those with “a life less ordinary” than the middle class do not usually undertake such labour.243 Or in the words of Leela Gandhi, “the novel form tends to imagine the nation as and through the middle-classes and their sensibilities” (“Indo-Anglian Fiction”). So while India’s sovereignty may well be a moot point for its beggared and beleaguered many, the nation-state and the state of the nation, both have some bearing or the other on the lettered effusions of the later Indian novelist—be it man, woman, minority, majority, hetero-, homo-, trans-, lesbo, metro-, dalit, brahmin, resident, expat or what-have-you. In all practical sense thus, what I track in the course of the later Indian novel is really the character of the post-Independence text.

When India kept its tryst with destiny in Etonian English and at the witching hour, it did not dismantle the colonial infrastructure of administration and control. Neither did it quarrel much with the superstructure of colonial governance.

243 The title of Baby Haldar’s autobiography as translated into English.
Instead, what it did in either case was take over. Indian independence, in other words, occurred more as a transfer of power than a transformation of it. And the paradigm shift I mentioned earlier consisted not so much in the dynamics of rule as in the mechanics of ruling. For political sovereignty meant a previously subject people were overnight pronounced constitutionally self-determining. Apropos the novel, since Independence did not materialise as a structural break with the overall temper of colonial modernity, many of the conditions which first proved conducive to the form’s rise to literary prominence in colonial India, continued to figure in post-colonial times as well; indeed, given official India’s resolve to carry through the project of received modernisation to its end, they were even strengthened. Circumstantial encouragement for the novel form, thus, remained and grew side by side with the spreading clout of print capitalism and India’s specific version of a mixed economy. Here I propose to address directly the changing blend of interests and investments, hopes and aspirations that influence the course of the later Indian novel. As before, I depend on a schematic approach to organise what is an olio of impulses. Per force what follows is a template to explore the various desires that prompt, provoke and propel the later novel—broad-based, it is to be hoped, but functional rather than exact or thorough.

244 As recently as 2005, and no less a personage than our Prime Minister at present, Dr. Manmohan Singh, affirmed this view. Receiving an honorary doctorate from his alma mater, and speaking as “the representative of a great nation and a great people,” he says:

What impelled the Mahatma to take such a positive view of Britain and the British people even as he challenged the Empire and colonial rule? I believe it was, undoubtedly, his recognition of the elements of fair play that characterized so much of the ways of the British in India. Consider the fact that an important slogan of India’s struggle for freedom was that “Self Government is more precious than Good Government.” That, of course, is the essence of democracy. But the slogan suggests that even at the height of our campaign for freedom from colonial rule, we did not entirely reject the British claim to good governance. We merely asserted our natural right to self-governance. Today, with the balance and perspective offered by the passage of time and the benefit of hindsight, it is possible for an Indian Prime Minister to assert that India’s experience with Britain had its beneficial consequences too. Our notions of the rule of law, of a Constitutional government, of a free press, of a professional civil service, of modern universities and research laboratories have all been fashioned in the crucible where an age-old civilization of India met the dominant Empire of the day. These are all elements which we still value and cherish. Our judiciary, our legal system, our bureaucracy and our police are all great institutions, derived from British-Indian administration and they have served our country exceedingly well. (“Elements of Fair Play”)
1. Desire for Taking Stock

About the role of modern Indian literature in the context of nineteenth-century Bengal, Sudipta Kaviraj writes, “Its task was to recreate enchantment in a world that had finally been desacralized and disenchantment” (“The Two Histories of Literary Culture in Bengal” 548). Well, yes and no. It is irrefutable that the domains of colonial government as well as “learned” discourse were progressively sanitised by the combined purges of secularism and scientific rationality. To infer from this that the rout was somehow complete, that the colonial world had finally been desacralized and disenchantment,” however, is a bit of a stretch. Enchantment was not so easily banished from the native scene. Denied official patronage and intellectual credibility, sacred cosmologies or kosmologies, if one heeds Raimon Panikkar’s preference, were forced to cede ground, to recede from centre-stage.245 Nonetheless, they continued to function as a sort of parallel, if peripheral, universe, that gained appreciably in influence the further away one went (spatially and ideologically) from urban centres of imperial power.246 Reality for Indians, then, was, more often than not, double-coded, at least, if not many-coded. And nowhere is this double-coding more evident than in the discourse of nationalism, pre-Independence. For, India was not just anthropomorphised as Motherland—this could simply have been in keeping with

245 In the words of Panikkar, “Under the name kosmology, I do not understand what is generally understood under the spelling cosmology. This latter word stands for a reflection of our logos about the cosmos, for a worldview according to the paradigm of the modern ‘scientific’ cosmology. Kosmology, on the other hand, is not a cosmology in the scientific objectifiable sense of the word, but a kosmos-legein, a reading of the cosmos as the cosmos manifests itself to us, more passive onlookers and hearers than active calculators and ‘experimenters.’ Kosmology is the world-myth of a particular culture, not a doctrine of a rationally articulated vision of the universe” (“The Dharma of India”).

246 In this context, refer to Rajat Kanta Ray, Exploring Emotional History. According to Ray, “neither the ‘reformer’ nor the ‘revivalist’ of Bengal renaissance fame—for instance Rammohun Roy on the one hand and Radhakant Deb on the other—were among the true orthodox. As leaders of opposite blocs in a public debate, they were new men. The conventional men did not debate the new issues. Enconced in Banaras and Puri and Nadia, they were not participants in the debates between the radicals and conservatives within the new circle called the public. The conventional and the orthodox belonged to an altogether different India; a vast India changing amorphously and in complex ways…” (35; emphasis added).
the tendencies of rational humanism, after all—it was also sometimes divinised. With the Bharata Mata Temple inaugurated by Gandhi in Benaras, 1936, having the map of India for its deity, as the most striking confirmation of the enduring itinerary of the sacred through the province of the profane. In any case, to return to Kaviraj’s observation, the vision of the nation was definitely one meme around which Indian novelists wove enchanting fictions. Not forever, though, and this is my point. With Independence, the future perfect of that ideal became the present imperfect of reality and older, utopian, modes of imagining the nation stood markedly altered. The desire for taking stock, which I identify as a recurrent spur for the post-Independence novel, can broadly be understood as both a sign and consequence of this alteration.

In everyday language “taking stock” means to make an appraisal, to scrutinise, etc. Associated with it is an attitude of skepticism and vigilance that does not believe blindly or easily; indeed, that implies clear thinking. Here, the phrase is used in a more elastic sense to range acts of social commentary as also testimony, in addition to the inventorying and analysis that is part of its regular semantic charge. Two factors seem crucial to the desire for taking stock, understood thus flexibly, being a powerful motivation among novelists.

Firstly, the diremption and distress that attended India’s Independence: figuratively speaking, desh ka anchal maila tha; there was blood on India’s hands and borders. The freedom struggle which had throughout ridden high on tales of idealism and sacrifice (whether of a violent or non-violent sort) became, in the

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247 To quote Sadan Jha, “In India, the imaginary bonding between nation and citizen is often mediated in and through religion.” For an illuminating yet concise track of “the life and times of Bharat Mata,” read Jha’s article of the same name. Refer also to Manu Goswami’s Producing India for an account of the “politics” to the mobilisations around this icon in the struggle for national Independence, and to Lisa McKeans “Bharata Mata” for its role and resonance in modern-day Hindu nationalist discourses, among others.

248 Basanta Koomar Roy’s translation of Bankim’s Anandamath first titled “Dawn Over India,” and published in 1941 takes a leaf out of history and makes of Bankim’s unselfconsciously Hindu Goddess-mother, a map!

249 I am playing, of course, on the title of Renu’s novel, translated into English as Soiled Border.
moment of its success, the scene of unbridled greed, rapacity and political power-brokering; the occasion for widespread mayhem, carnage and communal hate-mongering. Secondly, the subjectivity of freedom and autonomy: not to make of this a lapidary writ or anything, but accession to political self-determination does affect the gestalt of individual perception. At its most basic, a free agent would be one who is responsible for her actions and choices, her consent as well as dissent. Need I stress, strong incentive, that, to exercise discrimination. My point is, in different ways, both these circumstances combine such that for Midnight’s Children there can be no easy return to innocence. Given, among other things, the novel’s capacity to facilitate proxy engagement as well as to bear witness, what wonder that it emerges as the form often chosen by people trying to come to grips with different overwhelming experiences, different bedeviling events.

The bulk of the “Partition Novels,” for instance, I would attribute to the workings of this desire: if Yashpal’s *Jhootha Sach* exposes independent India as a truth that (be)lies, then Chaman Nahal’s *Azaadi*, Bhisam Sahni’s *Tamas* and Kushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan*, all document the struggle of ordinary people to hold on to their humanity, to keep from being entirely gutted by the bloodlust of those times. Similarly, Amrita Pritam’s *Pinjar* and Jyotirmoyee Devi’s *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*, give voice to the other side of silence; they remember what goes “missing” in patriarchal rejiggerings of borders and boundaries, viz., the large-scale, gender-specific violence that was directed at women. The violence itself, a fallout, one might add, of the longstanding reduction of women to property, honour, field, territory, nation, etc., ripe for male occupation, protection, veneration, consumption, violation, and correction, as a sexist context demands. I wrap up this section with the views of Amitav Ghosh. They are testimony to the continuing influence of the desire in question on contemporary writers.

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250 As Veena Das says, “Some realities need to be fictionalized before they can be apprehended” ("Language and Body" 69). Precisely the need, I am arguing, that the novel, among other forms, answered in the wake of the carnage attending India’s political Independence.

251 Urvashi Butalia’s *The Other Side of Silence* and Menon’s and Bhasin’s *Borders and Boundaries* have become standard reading now on the Partition.
Speaking of how The Shadow Lines grew out of his experience of the pogrom against the Sikhs in the wake of Indira Gandhi’s assassination, Ghosh writes,

When I went back to my desk in November 1984, I found myself confronting decisions about writing that I had never faced before. How was I to write about what I had seen without reducing it to a mere spectacle? My next novel was bound to be influenced by my experiences, but I could see no way of writing directly about those events without recreating them as a panorama of violence - "an aesthetic phenomenon," as Karahasan was to call it. At the time, the idea seemed obscene and futile; of much greater importance were factual reports of the testimony of the victims. But these were already being done by people who were, I knew, more competent than I could be. Within a few months, I started my novel, which I eventually called The Shadow Lines.... Before I could set down a word, I had to resolve a dilemma, between being a writer and being a citizen.... Writers don't join crowds—Naipaul and so many others teach us that. But what do you do when the Constitutional authority fails to act. You join and in joining bear all the responsibility and obligations and guilt that joining represents. My experience of the violence was overwhelming and memorable of the resistance to it.... What I saw at firsthand ... was not the horror of violence but the affirmation of humanity: in each case, I witnessed the risks that perfectly ordinary people were willing to take for one another. ("Ghosts of Mrs Gandhi")

Elsewhere in a review, Mukul Kesavan glosses and quotes Ghosh as follows:

Writing about the profound impact that the massacre had on his second novel, The Shadow Lines, Ghosh asks why, in the 1980s, did history seem to stumble and come to a standstill? The answer he offers is this: from the time of Hegel, perhaps earlier, the state was seen as an ethical institution, the bearer of the hope that the future would be both good and worthwhile. The State, therefore, "provides the grid on which history is mapped." But once the State becomes complicit in genocide and terror, it becomes tainted. It is no longer fit to be the bearer of our teleologies, it can no longer conquer the "unhistorical power of time." Put simply, after 1984 it became impossible for Indians to believe in a virtuous republic and so the future ceased to be a consolation. ("The Written World")

2. Desire for Self Determination

Intended here is both the ascertaining of a self as well as autonomy for the self that the novel helps articulate.

According to Meenakshi Mukherjee,

... until 1947 the independence movement provided a focus of life, a goal outside the individual self, that guided the purpose of more than one generation. After the formal achievement of independence, this external focus was lost and no adequate replacement was at hand. One Indian writer (not mainly of novels) has confessed his predicament in terms that sum up the general intellectual situation: "....with independence, my generation in particular was unable to respond heroically to the moral confusion that was soon to prevail. We were ready to disintegrate because we were wholly unprepared for the shock of self-recognition.... We realised that we were living until then on an ad hoc basis, taking what we could from the petty cash boxes of two different cultures, and were suddenly confronted with bankruptcy."

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Hence the turning inward; hence the introspective sorting out of the elements of two cultures that got inextricably woven together, to discover the root of the malady. *(The Twice Born Fiction 207)*

While *The Twice Born Fiction* itself is only about Indo-Anglian writings, the author offers the observations above as a comment on a general trend. Since "[t]his turning inward is evident in other Indian literatures as well, though the shift of emphasis has naturally not been simultaneous nor the same in extent in every language" (207).252 I believe Mukherjee is right on target in identifying the escalated self regard, if I may call it that, in later Indian novels. Even so, in accounting for the attention, she emphasises just one side of the story. For Mukherjee, the increased focus on the self in novels is to be attributed to an implosion of identity consequent upon the peculiar moral crisis and material chaos that Independence brought with it. But the phenomenon is as much to be ascribed to an explosion of identities within the matrix of sovereign nationality, even a veritable “insurrection of little selves” (1) to echo Aditya Nigam’s Foucaultian turn of phrase.253 Of course, seeing how the novel form is an exercise in elaborate and extended prosopoeia, among other things, its attraction to such projects should be evident—being second in suitability only perhaps to the straight-on autobiography (which by virtue of its very specificity and projected lack of artifice, though, can be limiting as well as seem daunting). Two kinds of novels, as it happens, demonstrate the desire for self determination. Both find ample place in the post-independence output of Indian novelists.

On the one hand, there is the novel that takes the individual as its object of narrative substantiation. Mimicking gestures of autobiography, confession, life-writing and memoir and employing techniques of interior monologue, stream of consciousness, commentary, dreams, myths, flashback, etc., these texts not only explore individual subjectivity, but also give it a density and weight, a singularity

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252 According to P. K. Ravindranath, for instance, “It is in the 1950s that a subtle change of emphasis from the outward to the inward, from what could be termed the social to the psychological or ‘spiritual,’ gets manifested in Malayalam fiction” (Introduction, *Second Turn* ix).

253 Nigam uses the term in the specific context of the crises of secular nationalism, i.e., in the context of a failed or failing nationalism. I use it here only in an evocative sense to describe the aggressive proliferation of smaller identities in post-Independence India.
and state, more befitting the conventions of modern individualism.\(^{254}\) The hegemonic narrative here, of course, remains that of bourgeois manhood in all its variety of arrival and achievement, angst and ecstasy, alienation and epiphany, love and longing, search and suffering, often displaying the characteristic blindness of the normative by denying the specificity of its cultural, class, caste and gender moorings.\(^{255}\) But it has by no means been the only narrative bid made on free and full subjectivity. Post-Independence, female writers, for instance, have increasingly used the novel genre to claim, craft and consolidate an autonomous bourgeois signature for Indian women.\(^{256}\)

On the other, there are novels that help forge various kinds of sub-national group identities. These range, \textit{inter alia}, from the religious and ethnic to the regional and

\(^{254}\) This is to be distinguished from the kind of focus on character in the early novels. There the protagonist was still a “heroine” or “hero” finding his or her meaning within the web of social relations and as part of that society’s collective destiny.

\(^{255}\) Kiran Nagarkar’s \textit{Cuckold} is an interesting novel in this regard. “One of the premises underlying this novel,” Nagarkar tells us, “is that an easy colloquial currency of language will make the concerns, dilemmas and predicaments of the Maharaj Kumar, Rana Sanga, and the others as real as anything we ourselves are caught in: a birth, divorce, death in our families, political intrigue, a national crisis, or a military confrontation in the life of our nation. The idea was to use contemporary idiom so long as the concepts we use today were available in the sixteenth century…. I was striving for immediacy, rather than some academic notion of fidelity, at best simulated” (author’s note in \textit{Cuckold}). Nagarkar, of course, succeeds with rare élan in his project. But, more to the purpose here, in taking a name from history to flesh out with a contemporary “self” through the device of language and technique, \textit{Cuckold} not only inserts that “self” into history, it also foregrounds the processes of investment and translation that are often invisible in novels engaged with less exotic scenes and subjects. Incidentally, the self that \textit{Cuckold} reads back into history is masculine: while Maharaj Kumar comes out all roly-poly and deep, “The Little Saint” remains a mostly flat and stony bhakti ki murat.

\(^{256}\) For a sampling of the whys and wherefores that informed this phenomenon consider the words of Ashapurna Debi, the author of the trilogy \textit{Pratham Pratusruti, Subarnalata} and \textit{Bakul Katha}, among others. Reflecting on her literary efforts, she writes, “From my childhood I have noticed that in our families—I am speaking of our middle class milieu—boys and girls are valued differently—women are ciphers and men are precious. This used to pierce my heart. But in our times we did not have the guts to protest, if we opened our mouths before the elders, we would be sent to the gallows! The sorrow, the anger, piled up inside. All those unpronounced protests of mine have appeared in my writing and figures of rebellious women…. It used to upset me enormously, why, why should the system be so unfair, why are women deprived of their human rights. These are the questions that appear over and over in all my writings…. I have not written about politics or social workers. Ordinary housewives are my subject matter…. There was always an uncompromising rebellion welling up within (me), but it was not direct…. Sometimes people think I am the heroine of all my works. This is incorrect. On the other hand, can any piece of writing be free of the writer’s inevitable ‘I’?” (Introduction, \textit{Subarnalata} xiv-xv).
linguistic. While the constituency they seek to represent may differ vastly, the
dynamics that underpin their inscriptions bear comparison. Indeed, discernible
across the board in these narratives are two simultaneous manoeuvres, carried out
with varying degrees of explicitness and consciousness. One is the attempt to
separate a set of traits, practices, myths, etc., from the dominant identity however
that comes to be posited—it could be heterosexual for gays and lesbians,
brahminical for dalits, metropolitan for regionalists, secular for religionists,
majority-Hindu for minority-_____, and so on and so forth. The other is to make
these markers of difference the glue to a new three-dimensional identity complete
with distinct history, culture, ethos, capacity and aesthetic that announces its
claim to mainstream recognition, membership and privileges.257

The evidence for both these moves is to be had, for example, in Bama’s *Sangati*, a novel that
Lakshmi Holmstrom, its translator into English, calls “the autobiography of a community” (xv). Bama’s own motivations for writing *Sangati*, expresses clearly the desire for self-determination espoused and articulated on behalf of Dalit Womanhood and against the claims of brahminical patriarchy, dalit patriarchy and bourgeois feminism. To quote her,

> We have all come across news, broadcast widely and everywhere, telling us of the position of women in our patriarchal society, and of the rights that have been plucked away from them. But news of women who have been trapped not only by patriarchy but also by caste-hatred is often sidelined, hidden, forgotten.... My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women, but also about their lively and rebellious culture, their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them, but to swim vigorously against the tide; about the self-confidence and self-respect that enables them to leap over threatening adversities by laughing at or ridiculing them; about their passion to live life with vitality, truth and enjoyment; about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories. I was eager that through them, everyone should know about us and our lives. *Sangati* grew out of the hope that the Dalit women who read it will rise up with fervour and walk towards victory as they begin their struggle as pioneers of a new society. (Acknowledgements ix)

Sharankumar Limbale, similarly, presents a distinct Dalit aesthetic to stand against the received classical triadic of *satyam, shivam, sundaram*. According to him:

> If an aesthetic consideration of Dalit literature is to be undertaken, it will be necessary to do so in the context of its uniqueness, inspiration, creation, role and features.... the aesthetic concept of “satyam, shivam, sundaram” is the selfish mechanism of upper caste Hindu society. It is necessary to replace this conception of aesthetics with one that is material and social.

> Human beings are first and foremost human—this is satyam.
> The liberation of human beings is shivam
> The humanity of human beings is sundaram.

... There is no truth and beauty in the world comparable to that which is found in human beings. Therefore, it is essential to discuss the equality, liberty, justice and fraternity of human beings. In my opinion, that discussion will be the discussion of the aesthetics of Dalit literature. (20-22)
Of these, only the novels inscribing mainstream masculinity's desire for self determination can, with any consistency, be attributed to Independence blues. For, to the extent that nationalism was an alias of native elite patriarchy—kindly, troubled or smug—both the failures as well as the fruits of freedom were first and foremost this “everyman’s” burden, this “everyman’s” gain. Other mobilisations shared in the malaise and rewards but secondarily. To them, citizenship as constitutionally determined and guaranteed, was more often than not both incompletely realised and an instigation, support and goal of remediation. In fact, the carving out of monolingual states for administrative convenience, the growing clout of identity politics in its various forms, the continuing practice in political democracy (its heredity-fetish notwithstanding), the thrust towards modernisation, urbanisation and the breaking-up of joint family set-ups, a free press, specialised journals and publishing houses, academic chairs, departments, programmes and scrutiny, etc., all aspects of the unfolding story of India’s Independence, provide a varied, mediated incitement as well as legitimacy for novels of self determination.

3. Desire for Innovation
The contention here is that the later Indian novelist trades the erstwhile “anxiety generated by originality” for a growing confidence to, frankly, play bricoleur.

With the Indian-English corpus, the practice generally is to offer a mandatory one-liner to Desani and then fast-forward to another expatriate, Rushdie and his chutney-fictions, as the decisive usher of change. This is arguably fair so long as the category under review, for which the lines of influence are being traced, is Indian-English novels. It becomes completely untenable when assumed, as is all too often the case, with regard to the fictional produce of India as a whole. That body of works reveals a yen for experimentation in styles, textures, formats and

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258 Even as I am writing this, Namrata Bhandare’s featured article in the Hindustan Times holds, “Rushdie is, perhaps, the greatest writer to have emerged out of the Indian subcontinent. Midnight’s Children is a masterpiece that launched a whole new school of magic realism” (“In Sir Vidia’s Shadow” 12). Throughout, the article only seems aware of writings by “Indians” in English. Yet at the end of it, with no evidence of irony whatsoever, it is able to advance the assessment stated above. Or maybe my reading is flawed. Perhaps her emphasis is only on exports and “expats,” those that “emerged out of the Indian subcontinent.”
themes, an openness to literary and cultural influences, that both predates Rushdie and sustains independent of him. To wit, then, Rushdie is part of the phenomenon identified and not the definition of it.

In many ways, of course, innovation is simply the logic of the genre working itself out: novelty being the stock-in-trade of the form. In other ways, it's the zeitgeist of modern/ising India finding expression. Here, I sort the experimentation evident in novels into two broad classes, i.e., innovation undertaken for its own sake and innovation attempted as a means to an end other than itself. This is, without doubt, a distinction of analytical contrivance—in practice, the motivations can rarely be told apart in absolute terms, appearing as they do, mostly as a difference in emphasis or of inference. What follows therefore is perforce provisional.

Under the first category fall all the novels that seem in one way or the other dominantly concerned with the craft of the enterprise. This preoccupation could, in different mixes and matches, be stylistic, thematic or formalistic, serious, playful or banal. It accounts for the “genre fiction” and fixation of an Ashok Banker, a Rupa Gulab or an Abhijit Bhaduri as much as it does for the type of novels that a Jaidev would castigate as illustrating a rootless, rarefied “culture of

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259 For a brief description of the ties of the novel to novelty, refer to Paranjape, Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel (77).

260 Actually, the postulates are not unrelated, either. Since the novel is the literary craft par excellence of the middle class. And that class' credo? In vintage Desani-speak “Enthusiasm’s the key-note. Man’s got to increase the size of things, bigger and bigger! Got to go fast, faster and faster! Got to add to the available things, more and more! Excelsior!” (“All About...” 20).

261 Gulab, for instance, cleaves stoutly to her “chick lit” ambitions: “A leading newspaper,” she confides, “said the book lacked in substance. And it’s completely true! The reason is that it was meant to be a fun read. If I wanted a Booker, I would have written a completely different story. There would have been a lot of pain, a lot of anguish, a lot of poverty and possibly, misery! But that’s not what I wanted to write. I’m never going to write a deep and meaningful book” (as told in a conversation with Sitanshi Talati-Parikh). Abhijit Bhaduri is part of a growing tribe who write what is called “lad lit” or “stud lit.” Some examples of this emerging sub-genre are Bhaduri’s Mediocre But Arrogant, Chetan Bhagat’s Five Point Someone and One Night at the Call Centre, Sudeep Chakravarti’s Tin Fish, Tushar Raheja’s Anything for You, Ma’am.
pastiche." Shashi Tharoor, in a frequently self-absorbed piece on his Riot, provides helpful insight into some of the urges that inform this type of writing. First off, he identifies ambition—albeit in a roundabout, defensive manner:

I am conscious that in India, critics expect a serious writer to be "ambitious," something that some felt I had failed to be in my second novel, Show Business, which came in the wake of The Great Indian Novel. I believe Riot is ambitious in its own way—The Great Indian Novel took an epic sweep across the entire political history of 20th Century India while reinventing the Mahabharata in the same breath, while Riot seeks to examine some of the most vital issues of our day on a smaller, more intimate canvas. Who is to say whether the work of the landscape artist is more ambitious than that of the miniaturist? As I said somewhat testily to an interviewer the other day, I would like to think that all my books are, in their own ways, extremely ambitious — otherwise, with everything else I have to do already in my life and work, what would be the point in writing them?

Next, he dwells on generic compulsions and how his latest offering makes the cut:

...Riot is also a departure for me fictionally, because unlike my earlier novels it is not a satirical work. Like the other two, though, it takes liberties with the fictional form. I have always believed that the very word "novel" implies that there must be something "new" about each one. What was new to me about the way Riot unfolded was that I told the story through newspaper clippings, diary entries, interviews, transcripts, journals, scrapbooks, even poems written by the characters— in other words, using different voices, different stylistic forms, for different fragments of the story. (It is also a book you can read in any order: though ideally you should read it from beginning to end, you can pick it up from any chapter, go back or forward to any other chapter, and you will bring a different level of awareness to the story.

Finally, among other things, he elaborates on why he writes: "I write, as George Bernard Shaw said, for the same reason a cow gives milk: it is inside me, it is got to come out, and in a real sense I would die if I could not" ("A departure, fictionally").

As against the largely self-referential adventurism of the foregoing, in the second category belong novels that innovate as a response to extra-novelistic stimuli. So, for instance, there is the experimentalism of Kamal Desai's Kala Surya and Hat Ghalnari Bai which Susie Tharu informs, has "been variously and persuasively read as existentialist, feminist, poststructuralist," and suggests in her own turn, "are all these—and more" (Foreword x). Shedding light on the style, form and politics of the texts, Sukhmani Roy, their translator into English, adds,

262 For more details, refer to Jaidev's The Culture of Pastiche. I have not read the novelists that Jaidev indicts in his work so I have no opinion on the justness or otherwise of the specific evaluation he makes of their works, but as an analysis of a broader cultural tendency among novelists and critics, I believe Jaidev has a point.
A number of mythological, literary and philosophical strands that constitute the weave of Marathi culture are worked into the texture of these novels in a tensile and magic prose: ironic, humorous and poetic in equal measure. The protagonist’s struggles portray a woman’s search for her true self as inextricably tied up in the definition of woman as lack or other in relation to the male self. The texts offer simultaneously a critique of patriarchal culture and of binary epistemology. (A Note by the Translator xv-xvi)

Similarly, positioned would be Bama’s innovations, of which Holmström writes:

*Sangati* flouts received notions of what a novel should be.... It has no plot in the normal sense, only the powerful stories of a series of memorable protagonists. ‘Sangati’ means news, events, happenings, and the book is one of interconnected anecdotes.... These individual stories, anecdotes, memories of personal experience are narrated in the first person, then counterpointed by the generalizing comments of the grandmother and mother figures, and later still, by the author-narrator’s reflections. The narrator is in the earlier chapters at least, a young girl of about twelve, and in the last three or four chapters, a young woman; but the reflective voice is that of an adult looking back and meditating upon her experience. The reflections—which may seem didactic—are a means of bridging experience and analysis, and end with a practical call for action. The form of each chapter is therefore exploratory, and the structure of the book as a whole seeks to create a Dalit-feminist perspective. (xvi)

Then, there are “Puranic novels” that use myths and mythological characters, not simply as stale réchauffés or opportunities to execute formal stunts but as a vibrant means to explore, highlight or engage with different dimensions of present situations. Likewise, both Arundhati Roy’s inventions on behalf of the “god of small things” and against sundry fossil traditions as well as O. V. Vijayan’s fabulism to break the chokehold of a modern materialist aesthetic and its “carnival of liberation” are part of this category. And the same goes for novels such as Jayawant Dalvi’s *Chakra* or Jagadamba Prasad Dixit’s *Murdhaghar* with their thematic focus on the swollen, putrid underbelly of urbanisation.

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263 Novels such as *Yayati*, *Yajnaseni*, *Ini Njan Urangatte*, and *Randamoozham*, immediately come to mind as examples. The phrase “Puranic novels” is B. Chandrika’s who uses them to describe different “contemporary redactions of the Puranic narrative mode” (“The Puranic Novel” 23-32).

264 In the Afterword to his *The Legends of Khasak*, O. V. Vijayan calls his work “a ballad of re-enchantment.” Speaking of its genesis, he writes:

In Hungary, they tricked and shot Imre Nagy. It blew my mind. I turned away. I began my uncharted journey…. I was gasping for fresh air, a whole skyful of living breath. Polemics, even history, did not matter anymore. I plumped for plants and flowers and a place like Khasak…. Once the spell was broken the rest was easy. The Stalinist claustrophobia melted away as though it had never existed. Ravi, my protagonist, liberation’s germ-carrier, now came to the village and re-entered his enchanted childhood. He was no longer the teacher, in atonement he would learn. He would learn from the stupor of Khasak. With that decision the architecture of the novel changed, the language changed… (205-06)
To link these up with the impetus mentioned above, the first set of novels, with their predominantly literary concerns, attest the generic goads to experiment, while the second shows innovation as the fictional response to various extra-literary spurs.

4. Desire forJustice

This is a desire as often expressed via negativa, by exposing and denouncing oppression, as by directly demanding or delineating justice.

There are a good number of novels written post-Independence, that owe their existence to the promptings of some such motive. What begs the question here is not so much the truth of this statement per se (since the textual evidence for it is quite unequivocal) but whether these texts are of the same order as those earlier novels produced by a desire for reform? If, what I am advancing here is only a nominal distinction, in other words?

The way I see it, while there is no denying the thirst and thrust for change and amelioration that is common to both the older as well as newer narratives, there is also a difference in accent and articulation between them, which it would be a mistake to elide. Very broadly, the earlier novels spoke the language of reform and improvement but almost always to the extent sanctioned by the discourse of duty, a duty, significantly, owed to something outside and other than the individual—be that community, caste, nation, family, religion, etc. Not surprisingly, given how ratifying authority was dispersed across various discursive sites—sites that were often ill-aligned with each other—they could only muster a fragmentary logic, exercise a restricted hegemony. The later novels, in contrast, push for change, but in terms informed by the discourse of rights and redressal, rights and redressal that are guaranteed in that grand narrative of the nation-state, i.e., the Constitution, itself a document of composite modernity. This is so even when the novels are vague in their expressions or flatly opposed to the totalising writ of India. With the latter as a more or less constant point of
reference and frame of action, thus, these texts function within the matrix of a fairly coherent though developing, complex, general and normative sensibility which is variously foil to their discontents, frontier to their contests, fodder for their dreams and franchise for their claims.

As mentioned before, a sizeable body of fiction has, and continues to answer the call of this desire. They address a range of issues, both topical and historical, and in styles that run the gamut from the polemical to the philosophical. So, for instance, Maveli Manram is supposed to advance the subaltern tribal cause and consciousness systematically denied and erased in the triumphalist script of nation and modernity. Ek Chaddar Maili Si, The Dark Holds No Terrors, Bhava and Dahan in their different ways illustrate how “[c]onjugal love is not merely an instance of sex turning violent [but how v]iolence is the form assumed by sexual love in a conjugal context” (Geetha, “On Bodily Love and Hurt” 324), how “it is through violence [and violation] that women in India have known (and continue to know) sexuality most intimately” (Tellis, “Ways of Becoming”), how, moreover, this is legally sanctioned even to the present times so that men can “rape their wives ... with impunity” (Kannabiran and Kannabiran 97).265 Novels such as Phaniyamma, Ratinath ki Chachi, or Neelkanthi Braja, likewise, record the cruelty with which upper-caste widows get treated; the destitution they undergo because of traditional diktat.266 Then again, where Indira Goswami, in her Chinnamastar Manuh, writes against ritualism in general and the animal-sacrifice that is a regular feature of Shakta worship at the Kamakhya temple, in particular, Amitav Ghosh in his The Hungry Tide makes a case for the fragile ecology of the Sunderbans but also for the poor anonymous settlers of this land

265 The reference is to the legal exception to the definition of rape under Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code; the exception reading “sexual intercourse by a man with his own wife, the wife not being under fifteen years of age, is not rape” (as qtd. in Kannabiran and Kannabiran 97).

266 For a more comprehensive idea of the treatment of widows in novels, refer to Rajul Sogani’s The Hindu Widow in Indian Literature. A briefer but equally useful engagement is to be found in the editorial Introduction by Uma Chakravartu and Preeti Gill to their collection of writings of widowhood called Shadow Lives, especially pp. 14-30.
caught between Tiger and Tide and eking out the sparcest of spare livings. There are many other novels that highlight caste oppression, economic exploitation, the dislocations of uneven modernisation, the “collateral damage” of globalisation, religious bigotry, state-backed violence, communal prejudices, traditional hypocrisy, gender discrimination, etc., operating on a variety of fronts, in a variety of manners. I conclude this section by citing Lakshmi Kannan’s Athukku Pogannum, a novel that shows how difficult it is for women to be “at home” when unreconstructed patriarchal values persistently cut them out from all-male vamshavrikshas. The author’s reasons for writing the novel, which I quote at some length below, bear out both the desire for bringing about a change for the better, as well as the terms in which it has been said here that change is conceptualised, viz., the language of rights and redressal, the language of law and justice. It also points to the perception of the novel form as an effective means of registering protest and raising awareness—short of direct intervention, that is.

In a preface to her story, Kannan says,

I suppose I could have written this novel much before I actually wrote it. What held me in check was not the propriety of writing on a theme like this, but a kind of hope as uncertain as it was unwise, which made me wait against my better judgement, that things may improve, after all. They did not. I wrote to break a long, oppressive silence, a mute, dull, numbing pain with which I witnessed women, many of them

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In an interview to the UN Chronicle, Ghosh says:

In the Sundarbans, drinking water is a huge problem. There was a German biologist who went there and decided the reason why the tigers were killing human beings was because they didn’t have fresh water. At enormous cost, fresh water wells were dug for the tigers and water was plentiful, while human beings there had no fresh water. They were looking on these wells being dug for the tigers while they themselves and their children were dying because they didn’t have access to fresh water. We can’t elude the issue. If you care for the environment, does that mean you don’t care about the plight of human beings, especially impoverished people... Whenever I have been in the Sundarbans, one of the things that really sensitizes someone to the nature of the moral dilemmas that we face is when people come and say, “Oh, for you, we are just pet food, aren’t we? The tigers are your pets and we are just their food.” In fact, the scale of debt in the Sundarbans is not trivial. According to the Forest Department in the Indian Sundarbans, tigers kill several dozens of people each year. Anthropologists there think that the figure is massively underreported, that as many as 200 people are killed there each year. If you include the Bangladeshi Sundarbans, that number may well be 300, perhaps even 500, killed every year. In any other part of the world, this would be considered a major national problem. So this is just an index of the fact that the impoverished people dying are extremely poor and don’t have a voice. They can’t make themselves heard and understood, and that is why we pay no attention to their plight.
from families that could be defined as ‘upper caste/class,’ formally educated, wealthy and apparently socially ‘respectable.’ They were families which nevertheless perpetuated an unchanging, set pattern of deprivation on their women—daughters, sisters, mothers—without any qualms of conscience or the slightest acknowledgement of women’s legal rights according to Indian constitutional laws, particularly the Hindu Succession Act of 1956. This practised misogyny would be less shameful if the families could not be defined as ‘upper caste/class, educated, cultured, decent’ and so on. But it is more sinister because it happens in families that look otherwise bright, ‘modern,’ with a veneer of a progressive, ‘with it’ kind of social atmosphere. It also happens because the family can count upon its women, upon their unconditional compliance, a tacit, silent acceptance of their lot in the unequal equation between them and their male siblings. The family makes the woman give a written declaration saying that she “does not wish to have any share in the property” and have it duly attested by a magistrate in the presence of a witness. I wrote the novel, among other reasons, not only to splinter that silence, but more to absorb and assimilate the humiliating, misogynous and belittling experience of these women at the hands of their own parents and conjugal families. I tried to flesh out some of their vaguely realized, whispered, inarticulate feelings that were smothered the minute they were identified as ‘protests.’ (vii-viii)

Holding patriarchal derogations squarely to blame for women’s poor self-esteem, she continues:

a daughter gets tossed around from a marginalised existence from one so-called ‘house’ to another without ever owning anything. It is she who is ‘owned’ by her father, husband and son. These women gave up their legal rights to a property without so much as a whimper of protest. They had neither the political will nor the rhetoric to articulate their feelings for they did not admit, even to themselves, that life to them has been a hurtful, humiliating deal. A restlessness, a kind of uprooted, ‘unhoused’ feeling takes over them, but they do not verbalise it. Ironically, it is this passive acquiescence that makes for an adhesive force which holds the family together and helps the women keep their peace with her parents, brothers and their family. (xii-xiii)

What’s more, while it is women’s labour, which goes into making a house a home:

[a] ‘home’ to them remains an elusive concept, or an abstract idea which remains an idea, for it does not give them the restful space or a peaceful ambience to work or relax. Except for the lucky ones, there are millions of Rama Doraiswamys [a character in her novel] who work untiringly on the hundred odd details that go to make a house and hand it on a platter, custom-made to the husband. In contrast, the house that she worked so hard to make comfortable for her family is not a nook or a lair or a serene nidus or a dovecote where she can fly home to roost. Instead, it is a place that demands and takes a lot of energy and time to keep it like a ‘home’ for the rest of the family. (xiii-xiv)

Finally, Kannan tells of the fairly widespread, mixed but enthusiastic response her novel elicited from Tamil readers. “A few of them,” she says, “declared that I had written the ‘story of their lives’” (xiv)—precisely the facility, I would say, that makes novels a first choice among literary forms for writers moved by a vigilant/e desire for justice.
5. Desire for Fame

Comprehended by this phrase is a family of desires for money, for honour, for stardom.

Right from the time novels began appearing on the literary scene in India, of course, writing one has been a means of attempting and advertising distinction. In the early years, as already shown, this was closely connected with its peculiar position in the colonial context. Post-Independence, the politics has been somewhat different.

Till about the 1980s, novelists were ambitious but mostly about appreciation from readers and recognition from their peers. The accent was on accumulating creative, artistic, literary credit. This was not necessarily because the writers were all beyond temptation of a non-literary kind. Conditions were such that even if susceptible, enticements came in a different shape then than what would obtain later. Limited literacy, changing leisure habits and taste meant a narrow, unstable, though ever-growing bourgeois appeal for the form; a publishing industry still to find its feet meant erratic editorial, printing and marketing back-up as also a bit of a struggle getting something published; nil to modest institutional support meant quality journals were the outcome of inspired but somewhat idiosyncratic enterprise difficult to sustain for long, restricted in reach, as also few and far between; academic indifference meant a scant if not sloppy critical regard; it also meant a fledgeling review culture in different print media not infrequently vulnerable to the writ of sundry cabals, and so on. Hardly the infrastructure, that, it will be granted, for writing novels as a profitable professional venture (with the emphasis there being on profit). To add to this, ideologically, the attitude to money—that new marker of wealth—was a tortuous mix of old-world aristocratic snobbery, socialist derogation and pragmatic covetousness. It was a time when simple living and high thinking was still the ideal among the powers-that-be, if only for public consumption. To write something in bald pursuit of Mammon, in such circumstances, would only be courting disapproval rather than securing
success, even if the opportunity was present. The novelists of the period attempted the pen, thus, for literary distinction. Otherwise, they did it for the social influence accruing to them from that distinction.

A separate point worth noting about this phase was the relative lack of disparity between writers operating in different languages, more specifically between writers in English and those called, with nativist particularity, the bhashas. Sure, a Narayan, a Rao, an Anand, or a Markandaya found greater recognition in the West but this was not of an eminence or affluence vastly different from what an established writer in one of the regional languages might have commanded on their own turf. Till, that is, about the 1980s.

In 1980 Salman Rushdie published his *Midnight’s Children*. Along with winning the Booker Prize, it changed the way the West and, after them we, perceived Indian writing in English. Seth, Roy, another Booker later, amidst fat literary advances, unprecedented international sales, avid media attention, glitzy book launches and almost incessant chatter, the celebrity Indian novelist had well and truly arrived. This “arrival,” of course, is epiphenomenal; not all to do with literary genius and much to do with changing ground realities in the West as well as India. In the West, among other things, the same dynamics which made postcolonial theory fashionable at the time applied to literature—the growing presence of an educated South Asian diaspora-on-the-make, that constituted a potential if not actual demand. Also, a factor was the prospect of tapping a proportionately small but numerically sizeable Anglophone market opening up in that region. India, meanwhile, liberalising apace, embraced the “cosmopolitics” of globalisation. Materially this delivered a boost to private enterprise and consumer

268 For the record Ruth Prawar Jhabvala as well Naipaul had done it before Rushdie.

269 Anita Desai, for instance, says, “It’s become strong in the last ten or twenty years. When I started to write it certainly wasn’t. There was just a few of us who were writing in English; we had a lot of problems in finding publishers, there were very few readers, and no one seemed very interested at all in our work. I think things changed very dramatically—and I can put a date to it: it was 1980—when Salman Rushdie published *Midnight’s Children*, and it had such a huge success in the West” (as ctd. in Melwani, “In the Land of Gup”).
capitalism. Ideologically, it made profit the barometer for policy and conspicuous consumption kosher. Needless to say, neither the publishing trade nor the novelist, as part of it, remained immune. In fact, to quote Amit Chaudhuri, the “confidence” that gets touted as the trademark of the new breed of IWE is not so much about artistic or philosophical assurance as about “visibility, success, proximity to power.” It is, moreover,

a general, seamless metaphor for India in the age of globalisation. Indeed, Indian writing in English, since Rushdie, has participated in a subtle but significant shift in register in the way India views itself and others: from a once-colonised nation “finding its voice,” to quote from V.S. Pritchett’s review of Midnight's Children, to a player on the world stage with a ‘say’ in the world. A thin line divides post-colonial pride from imperialist ambition, separates the India trying to consolidate its democratic traditions from the India with Security Council aspirations; the story of Indian writing in English traverses, in the last 20 years, this journey, and is located where the dividing line is at its most blurred. (Chaudhuri, “Oh, For The Return of The Clown Prince”)

To restate my point, then, the novelist as luminary made a grand debut on the Indian literary stage in the wake of Rushdie’s stellar act.

The most notable effect this phenomenon has had is in the spate of wannabe-writing it triggered, writing driven, that is, by the dream to strike it rich, to make it big. In the absence of straightforward confession, of course, the ascription of

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270 Even someone who famously seceded from a nation and its politics is slightly more circumspect vis-à-vis the “goblin market” of capitalism. In response to a question about her own co-optation, Arundhati Roy, now “an independent, mobile republic,” presumably, says, “yes, it could be argued that I’m yet another commodity on the shelves of the Empire’s supermarket, along with Chinese cabbages and freeze-dried prawns. Buy Roy, get two human rights free! But between the NGOs and Al Qaeda—frankly, I’m with the many millions who are looking for the Third Way” (Anand, “If Bush Is So Acceptable To Manmohan And The Congress, Why Lose Sleep Over Modi?”).

271 One rather bombastic example of such “confidence,” is Rushdie’s assertion, that “‘Indo-Anglian’ literature represents the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books” (Rushdie and West x).

272 Read also Leela Gandhi’s essay on elite aesthetics and novel-writing titled, “Indo-Anglian Fiction.”

273 To give one example of starry presence on the domestic literary firmament, consider Shobhaa De. At one time billed the Jackie Collins of India, this lady is a brand all by herself. For more than a decade now, Shobhaa De has with an in-your-face insouciance churned out salacious pap that consistently makes the domestic bestsellers scroll. Along with “glam quotient,” “oomph factor” and such other mystifications of celebrity reportage, I believe, slick packaging, shrewd marketing and an unflagging capacity to toot that horn with style, are the keys to her abiding success.
motives such as inevitable here will admittedly be open to the charge of wrongful attribution. I accept this possibility even as I press the point.

Broadly put, there are two areas in which a desire for stardom reveals itself: one is in the themes chosen and the other is in the treatment and presentation. As regards the former, what I characterise wannabe-writing, shows an unfailing penchant for the sensational, the shocking, the cause célèbre, the exotic. So, for instance, there is the theme of oppressed bourgeois womanhood milked for all it is worth: in her eminently forgettable The Web of Silk and Gold, not satisfied with relentless, domestic violence, rape, murder, systemic corruption and an immaculate conception, believe it or not, Shakti Niranjchana throws in a “white men saving brown women from brown men” angle for good measure. Another tendency is to pick up some hot topic to write about. What can be hotter than terrorism at a time when the “international community” is waging a sanctimonious “War on Terror”? Ergo, enter Rushdie’s Shalimar the Clown, joining the ancient tale of heterosexual love and betrayal to the modern saga of organised terrorism. Then there is the peddling of exotica: Pankaj Mishra’s The Romanantics set in Benaras, again, with a cross cultural love interest included—just in case, the strange, outlandish ways of “Spiritual India” fails to do the trick, I guess. Or the single-minded pursuit of the scandalous: Raj Kamal Jha’s “audacious” The Blue Bedspread is a barely coherent assemblage of incest, pederasty, wife-beating and such other delights, whose only discernible audacity lies, as far as I can tell, in soliciting a read.

274 The practice of having blurbs and even add-on pages to the novel with lavish praise, of course, is a component of packaging. In the domestic set-up this is particularly the case when some Western reviewer or half has decided to notice the book (for instance, look at Raj Kamal Jha’s The Blue Bedspread published by Picador India).

275 In fact, tropes of cross-cultural encounters, travel and tourism seem to be a staple for the wannabe-writer. The key to success seems to lie in appearing globally local and locally global, in being part of the “celebration of diasporas as the exemplary condition of late modernity” (Vijay Mishra, “New Lamps for Old” 67).
Vis-à-vis the latter, the clue is artificiality and irrelevance. When the narrative effect appears forced, incidents contrived and gimmicky; when the setting is Indian but the readership primarily Western as indicated in pointless glosses and glossaries. Take, for instance, Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games*—it comes with a massive glossary that has such "exotic" words as *aai* and *adrak*, *anda*, *badboo*, *beta*, *gaadi*, *gaandu*, *maderchod*, *masala*, *puja*, *pujari*, *prasad*, Sachin Tendulkar (!!!), *sala*, *salwar kameez*, in addition to lines from easily recognisable Hindi film songs. Sort of like watching *Munnabhai* with subtitles—quite unnecessary for the experience at least in present-day India, as indeed Chandra himself may grant.

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276 This has been the subject of a spirited exchange between Vikram Chandra, Meenakshi Mukherjee, and later Rajeswari Sunder Rajan published in the pages of *The Hindu*. I am with Chandra when with the help of "Borges-bhai," brio and lusty blows to the Left and Right, he demolishes Mukherjee(-behn?) and the "Cult of Authenticity" of which she is made out, a trifle exaggeratedly, it seems to me, to be the high priestess: cultural commissars must indeed be decommissioned. I am with him also when he turns the tables and shows via Ashis Nandy, Indian English academics performing "gladiator-like acts of ritual defiance" in controlled circumstances to entertain and soothe their Western masters variously ruffled conscience, all the while craving a pat on the head, a fellowship, a chair, some medals and monies, perhaps even "Swiss chocolates." But when Chandra tries from his "contested" position in the literary-critical fraternity of Indian English to claim a *biradiri* with, say, Gujarati and Marathi writers, when he opposes the dubious stance of Authenticity with the equally flimsy fronts of Art and Pleasure, argued for in the broadest of broad terms, then it seems like this is a pointless exercise, a family squabble between well-placed writers and well-placed critics for some more traction within an iniquitous system of which they are already both beneficiaries (for details, refer to Chandra's essay, "The Cult of Authenticity").

277 As G. J. V. Prasad states, such an orientation inevitably writes itself into the work: "if a writer decides his/her audience is in the English speaking West then s/he has to write in relation to the West and accede to be read accordingly.... The writer will have to play by their current rules and be read according to their feelings of guilt or glory. In any case, you cannot stop others from carrying out their projects, to read various works the way they want. But if they are not your primary audience you need not be part of their project, you need not be complicit in it" ("Reply-paid Post-colonialism" 191). Then again, Namvar Singh expatiating on the same phenomenon, writes, "There is an attempt to incorporate within the process such myths, customs and beliefs of Indian life as are exotic for the West and therefore the objects of its special curiosity. So that the argument may not fall for lack of practical demonstration, our novelists and especially our English language novelists are putting their heart and soul into the production of such novels. If we were to go by the results, the Indian novels in English today would seem to be rather more 'Indian' than the so-called 'regional language' novels" ("Decolonising the Indian Mind" 80-81).

278 Refer to *The New York Times* review, which refers to the glossary and its uses for different readers (Gilroy, "Gangsta Raj"). For the glossary itself, visit Chandra’s website, if the idea of this 900+ opus is daunting.

279 Even as he maintained that other Indian readers might need the help of the glossary with which *Sacred Games* comes supplied, he also says, "If I were sitting in a coffee shop in Bombay telling
But I have only dealt here with Indian novelists in English. Did I just reduce Indian novels to novels in English or am I saying the writers in languages other than English are somehow impervious to the razzle-dazzle of postmodern celebrity? As it happens, neither. The specific focus is because of the very real difference in reach, rewards and renown that writers in English and writers in regional languages can aspire for. In the words of Tabish Khair, “As literature gets commodified, the stuff of contracts and media campaigns, only stories that have mass market appeal and encourage us not to think too much are getting noticed,” celebrated (“Share-value of Stories Today”). The high “share-value” enjoyed by English, and by extension, the novelist writing in English, in the global marketplace cannot at present be matched by any of the other languages in India. Not innocence, then, as absence of opportunity, keeps the regional writer, even if so-minded, from trying to take the novel way to stardom. For, much as the translation industry has expanded and continues to expand, much as the publishing concern has diversified and continues to grow across India, the scale of material and media recognition still allows the regional writer to realistically chase only local or national literary distinction and through it, limited social influence. Needless to say, when some of them repeatedly and categorically use authenticity as a stick with which to belabour writers in English, it is difficult not to read a trace of envy into their scolds, fair or unfair as that may be—they have both the talent to deserve with the best and the taste for it, if their presence at domestic literary dos, is any indication.

**Conclusion**

If the conspectus above has sometimes given the impression that novels could be the monopoly of a single desire—due mainly to my reluctance in repeating texts to illustrate different points—let me take this opportunity to issue a timely

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this story to a friend of mine, the language I would use would naturally be sprinkled with these words … And it would contain a whole bunch of cultural references that both of us would share. I would feel no need to explain it” (as ctd. in a write-up by Wohlsen).
disclaimer. Bama’s Sangati can easily be read, for instance, as inscribing a desire for taking stock, for justice, for fame, in addition to the desire for self-determination and innovation, it has been used to demonstrate here. Similarly, Raj Kamal Jha’s Fireproof, a novel not mentioned above, could substantiate a desire for taking stock, for experimentation, for celebrity or for justice. This is because at any given time, a novel is, unless thoroughly one-dimensional (and even then, perhaps), a negotiation of desires conducted through the mediations of the publisher’s trade, between writer, implied reader and reader, between reader, implied writer and writer, in which contexts, accents, inflections, intentions and interpretation, all, have a part to play and come multiply determined.

In drawing a broad picture of the major spurs to novel-writing in India over the span of approximately a century and a half, this chapter, of course, has focussed only on the first party to those transactions (even as it acknowledges the role played by interpretation in that focus). More specifically, it has attended to the snarl of desires variously operative at the novel’s point of “origin” i.e., in the writer’s consciousness, with the desires themselves being read as so many broad types of response to prevailing socio-political conditions. Such an exercise is useful not only because these impulses and incentives produce the genre but also because they are written into the product, into its form, theme, style and symbol. For, as Grahame Smith observes, “Any significant context will be internalized [in the work] in the way that human beings internalize the social forces that impinge on them” (The Novel and Society 43). Ultimately, this makes it easier to grasp in certain recurrent features and tropes of novels, the trace of the wider web of ideological, affective and material stimuli for the form.

One connection it would be salutary to keep in mind, for instance, concerns difference and discord. Mikhail Bakhtin pointing to the heterogeneity of its generic lineage, of course, reads the novel form as intrinsically heteroglossic and dialogic. Without necessarily going that far, it is possible to say that the novel narrative invariably needs opposition, dissension, variance as a structuring block
of some sort, ideological, formal, thematic, at the level of plot, character, temporality, etc., to develop, but also, to be. Among the theorists of the early novel in England, it is common to consider this as broadly tied to "the confrontation between 'a Protestant, capitalistic, imperial, insecure, restless, bold, and self-conscious culture,' and 'a constrictive, authoritarian, hierarchical, and too-neatly-sorted past'" (J. Paul Hunter as ctd. in Hawthorn, *Studying the Novel* 19-20). In the context of early Indian novels, too, conflict is a staple generic feature. Like with the English novel, here, too, the form is the craft of an emergent bourgeois consciousness. But taking that homology any further is problematic. For, whereas in the English case, the novel form is associated with a bourgeois spirit that at least to begin with was indigenously socially revolutionary, in India, conditions marking the form's advent were dominated by the project of colonialism.

On the one hand, the novel as it impressed itself upon the native scape came encoded with the socio-cultural hegemony of imperialist enterprise—it came with a certain prestige attached. On the other, though in the forefront of a newly forming bourgeois identity, the pioneers, practitioners, patrons and readers of the genre, could not be simply assimilated to a bourgeois politics, as this stood forged in England. There, the middle-classes drew from traditionally disenfranchised groups that were committed to the ideological and material delegitimation of aristocratic feudalism to secure their own historical rise to power (accounting for the often lowly view of the form in its early days). In India, though instituting various breaks with the old, most of the early novelists drew from sections of the traditional elite—be it Bankim, Bharatendu Harishchandra, Chandu Menon, Krupabai Sattianadhan, Govardhanram Tripathi, Swarnakumari Debi or Rokeya Shekhawat Hussain, for example. They were thus invested with it in different ways—ideologically, emotionally, symbolically, materially. Altogether this meant, one, the form and its ideology was not embraced without residual or rampant feelings of cultural unease. And two, reform rather than revolution was often the novelist's stock-in-trade. I believe the manner in which many of the
early Indian novels framed as well as resolved the tradition–modernity dialectic bears out the graph of this contested position—conservative but questing, looking to reconcile the old with the new without acceding to the dominion of the latter completely but acknowledging its attractions when well “managed.” That dialectic itself, in fact, is an abiding legacy for the novel form in India, although its later formulations as well as resolutions answer to the different pressures of an unevenly modernising, constitutionally democratic, caste, class, gender differentiated, sovereign, secular, republic, latterly on the fast-track to free-market economics.

Another significant point about novel narrations is their advancement of the case for modern Individualism. It is a critical commonplace that the rise of the English novel was crucially implicated in the consolidation of the “estate” of a private, embattled, psycho-subjective self with secrets to hide or confessions to make, the notion of a human being as a separate, autonomous, thinking, feeling, moral agent, who was at odds with the surroundings, while being the foundational and final, irreducible determinant of value. That this coordinated with the insights of Protestantism and the interests of capitalist trade practices only goes to indicate the ideological affinities of the novel form. All in all, as Jeremy Hawthorn puts it:

> It certainly seems to be the case that the new spirit that accompanies the early development of capitalism infuses the emerging novel. Along with a stress on individualism goes, too, a growing concern with the inner self, the private life, subjective experience. As the individual feels him or herself an individual, rather than a member of a static feudal community with duties and characteristics which are endowed at birth, then he or she starts more to think in terms of having certain purely personal rather than merely communal interests. And this gives the individual something to hide. Without wishing to oversimplify an extremely complex and far from uniform historical development we can say that in a certain sense the private life as we know it today is born with capitalist society, and that the novel both responds and contributes to this development. (*Studying the Novel* 21)

Once again, though, the early Indian novels, generally, furrow a slightly different track.

In these narratives while individuation and individuality are both substantiated and celebrated, the notion of Individualism is either missing from the pages or consistently run down. That is to say, these novels recognise the private and the
personal through their formal and thematic articulations but firmly within the fold of the social. Exceptional license for the individual is obtained mostly through reference and in the service of something larger than that self. The reasons for such an orientation are not far to seek. Apart from the critique of the ethos of Individualism instituted from different available holistic perspectives, they can be had more or less in the ambivalent stake of the native bourgeoisie in the colonial capitalist venture. On the one hand, given the seismic scale of fragmentation, dissociation and mobility introduced by the agencies of imperial administration and surplus extraction, a growing sense of people as individuated entities, was virtually inevitable, and even desirable, for the opportunities it rendered available. On the other, given that they (the native bourgeoisie) were neither the primary agents nor beneficiaries of colonial trade practices, given that they were more acted upon than actors in that iniquitous play of commerce, a too-ready approval of Individualism would only have hurried the process of social disintegration and modern capitalist reconstitution; in the process “alienating” their own control over peoples and spaces accumulated through traditional patriarchal and casteist sanction, among others. As it happens, the circumspect approach to individual rights and freedoms is an enduring feature, by and large, even amongst later India novels, with the exceptions usually being fictions produced by some members drawing from different sections of the traditionally oppressed, such as, women, driven, as already mentioned, by the desire for self-determination.

In the next part of this thesis, it is my aim to explore some of the recurrent subjects of narrative fiction especially for the shape and tenor of their trans/formations of gendered desires. Though not the object of direct demonstration, I believe, the circumstantial encouragement for the form as well as some of its traits delineated here will appear useful reference points both for the themes tackled and the resolutions articulated in the novels.