Chapter 2

Girish Karnad and the Subaltern in History and Myths

Although Girish Karnad was Dutt’s contemporary and also shared his fascination with certain historical episodes, Karnad has never espoused any particular political doctrine through his plays. In fact, in the available treatises on the history of post-independence Indian drama, his name is almost synonymous with a new school of drama based on the incorporation of devices from folk-genres. What remains ignored in the process is his simultaneous preoccupation with different forms of subalternization, especially the intersections of caste and gender, which he repeatedly explores through his forays into history and myths. This chapter would focus on such representations by discussing five of Karnad’s plays in three successive chapters – Tale-Danda, Yayati and The Fire and The Rain and Hayavadana and Nagamandala.

Tale-Danda

The preoccupation with history which characterises the plays of Dutt is also evident in the plays of Girish Karnad, as exemplified by Tale-Danda. Based on an episode from twelfth century Karnataka, the play, Karnad claimed, was written specifically in response to the Mandal-Mandir saga in which the country was involved during the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the next decade. The controversy refers to the intersection of growing Hindu fundamentalism revolving around the Ramjanmabhoomi movement on the one hand and the reaction against the governmental decision to implement caste-based reservation in government jobs based on the recommendations of the Mandal Commission. While the origin and nature of Hindu fundamentalism as a potent source of postcolonial subalternization has already been discussed in other chapters, this chapter would focus on the specifically Brahmanical nature of that Hindutva and how it seeks to appropriate lower and backward castes within a unified, homogenised ‘Hindu’ identity for practical electoral and political needs without discarding the basic hierarchy, for its own political gains. Such analysis would then be related to an examination of the specific dimensions of Tale-Danda which uses a
historical episode of twelfth century Karnataka to pose relevant questions about postcolonial subalternization based on caste and the undeniable internal ruptures within Hindu society which the ideology of Hindutva consistently seeks to elide. The chapter would also offer an analysis of different modes of subaltern action, especially during moments of political crisis, in order to derive relevant conclusions for the future.

**Hindutva, Caste and Postcolonial Subalternization**

On 15th October, 2002, five dalits of Jhajjar, Haryana were brutally lynched to death by a frenzied mob of supposedly thousand people, near the police station of Duleena, for allegedly skinning a dead cow on the side of the road leading to Jhajjar. While no one was arrested for the atrocities in which the eyes of the individuals were gouged out and bodies mutilated, Hindutva forces, represented by Vishwa Hindu Parishadand and Bajrang Dal, even took out a victory procession in honour of the murderers. Yashpal Gandhi, a local VHP office-bearer even said that the "Ravanas found slaughtering cows had been punished" and those who acted against them should be honoured (Rajalakshmi, 2002). Such a phenomenon clearly exposes the hypocritical claim of Hindutva organisations of representing the entire Hindu community, irrespective of caste-distinctions, and the inherently casteist nature of their version of aggressive, militant Hindutva, subsequent incidents in Jhajjar only provide us with further corroborations of the threats posed by the revivalist Hindutva organisations and their staunchly Brahmanical nature, which actually is inimical to Muslims, Christians and also Dalits. For example, when medical report proved that initial accusation against the five murdered Dalits of killing a cow was actually false, as the cow had died a natural death the day before, the Hindutva organisations labelled that as an ‘eyewash’ and even launched a ‘sangharsh samiti’ to prepare for further confrontation (PUDR-Delhi, 2003).

Thus the Brahmanical discourse of deifying the cow and privileging its protection is made to take centre-stage while the issue of murdering five innocent Dalits is ignored, marginalised and even justified on grounds of religious fervour, as incited by various associated Hindutva groups and the casteist frameworks within which they operate. This

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46 Shorthand for Hindu right-wing religio-cultural fundamentalist organizations.
initial example helps to confirm how the casteist nature of Hindutva is often ignored on account of its ostensible foregrounding of a pan-Indian Hindu identity which seeks to transcend caste. This conflict between Hindutva and Dalit self-assertion, which obviously came to the foreground during the Mandal Commission controversy and forms the background of Karnad’s play, needs to be taken into account to understand the dynamics of *Tale-Danda* and the nature of its critique.

Interestingly, such a contradiction between Hindutva and Dalit self-assertion has been prominent ever since the inception of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha or RSS, which is the central organisation of the Sangh Parivar and the chief ideological force behind Hindutva as we know it today. RSS founder-leader Hedgewar’s discussion of the original causes behind the inception of RSS not only harp on familiar anti-Muslim rhetoric, but also focus on the organised assaults against Brahmanical dominance which were beginning to emerge in contemporary India, especially in Maharashtra, the cradle of Hindu nationalism:

As the tide of national struggle came to ebb, mutual ill-will and jealousies came on the surface. Personal quarrels raged all round. Conflicts between various communities had started. Brahman-non-Brahman conflict was nakedly in view. No organisation was integrated or united. (T. Basu 14)

Such an assessment not only emphasises the centrality of Brahman-Non-Brahman conflicts in the origin of RSS, but also points towards the significance of movements launched by Mahatma Jotiba Phule and others against casteist discrimination and untouchability in various areas of Maharashtra which invariably led to erosion of Brahmanical dominance. It is in this context that Tapan Basu and others remark that “Organized Hindutva emerges right from the beginning as an upper-caste reaction to efforts at self-assertion by downtrodden groups within the Hindu fold” (T. Basu 16). In fact, not only were RSS founders and leaders mostly Chitpavan Brahmins, their existing leadership, even now, despite token representation of lower-castes, continues to rely heavily on middle-class, upper-caste populations to preserve the Sanskritising, upper-caste core of Hindutva as a whole.

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47 A government committee, established in 1979, led by parliamentarian B.P. Mandal to determine the socially and educationally backward and consider the issue of reservations and quota in education.
This can be further substantiated by several other examples such as the statements and discussions found in M.S. Golwalkar’s _Bunch of Thoughts_ which the RSS virtually regards as its Bible. Not only does he categorically declare as his motto, “Not Equality but Harmony” but goes on to glorify the quest for “highest harmony in spite of the inherent disparities in nature” (Golwalkar 25) which basically translates into retention of caste-based division of labour and consequent social hierarchy. This becomes explicit when he approvingly quotes the scriptures to argue that the Hindu community is the ‘Virat Purusha’ in which “Brahman is the head, King the hands, Vaishya the thighs and Shudra the feet” (Golwalkar 36). Not only does it reinforce the existing caste-hierarchies in society but also ignores the issue of untouchability which gained ground precisely through such scriptural declarations. Furthermore, Golwalkar also repeatedly criticises Buddhism which, we must remember, only emerged as a critique of casteist discrimination within Hindu society, and inspired individuals like Ambedkar whose decision of embracing Buddhism also led to the conversion of thousands of Dalits into Buddhists. Not only does Golwalkar declare that “Pulling out one’s roots of swadharma and transplanting something else in its place will only result in utter chaos and degeneration” (Golwalkar 65) but deplores the effect of the Buddhist Age of Indian history by accusing it of creating social unrest and ends up celebrating the caste-division as “a great bond of social cohesion” (Golwalkar 108).

In a typical fashion, Golwalkar thus blithely ignores the whole history of persecution, massacre and exploitation against shudras and untouchables under the ruse of ‘social cohesion’ and thereby nullifies any movement that calls for the abolition of the caste system or militates against the very structures of Hindu religion as scores of Dalit activists down the ages have done. In fact, all of Golwalkar’s statements are actually born out of his persistent displeasure with such activists, their organisations and the political and administrative improvements, however disputable and fragile, that have been ushered in post-independence India. This becomes explicit when he states:

Separatist consciousness breeding jealousy and conflict is being fostered in sections of our people by naming them Harijans, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and so on and by parading the gift of special concessions to them in a bid to make them all their slaves with the lure of money. (Golwalkar 110)
In one sweeping statement, not only does Golwalkar scoff at Gandhi’s attempt, however problematic, of removing untouchability, but also derides the constitutional measures adopted by the sovereign Indian state to uplift beleaguered communities through affirmative actions. What is all the more ridiculous is that while such attempts are being accused of breeding greed, jealously and strife, there is no attempt to acknowledge the centuries of misery that such communities have had to endure on account of the casteist principles of Hindu society. Quite naturally therefore, reservation and concession in education are staunchly opposed by Golwalkar who goes on to claim, despite all his protestations against casteist discrimination and untouchability, that caste-based reservations will only promote “people with low intelligence and capacity” which would cause holistic degradation in every sphere (Golwalkar 366).

**The Mandal-Mandir Saga**

Similar arguments will be re-iterated during the course of the Mandal Commission controversy by various representatives of upper-castes, including future Bharatiya Janata Party (henceforth BJP) leaders like Arun Shourie who would eventually become a minister in the BJP government of 1999. Moreover, Golwalkar’s statements are categorical evidences of the fundamentally Brahmanical nature of revivalist Hindutva which also manifested itself through various instances that came to the foreground during the Ramjanmabhoomi movement, as documented by Professor Basu and his illustrious colleagues. For example, in Bilhaur and Unnao in Central U.P., RSS volunteers “candidly admitted that their organization depended on upper-castes”, a former BJP leader at Khurja described the party as a “middle class, upper-caste” party (T. Basu 88), a VHP rally in Delhi came up with the slogan “Jis Hindu ka khun na khola woh Hindu nehi Bhangi hai” (The Hindu whose blood is yet to boil is not a Hindu but a sweeper), and a Maharashtrian Brahman journalist confessed that he joined VHP to assuage ‘Hindu hurt’ which referred to appeasement of lower-castes at the cost of ‘poor Brahmans’ (T. Basu 89). Such reactions and responses both emphasise the upper-caste bias of the entire Sangh Parivar and how the growing influence of the Hindutva forces could be seen as a consolidation of upper-caste forces, especially in North India, specifically in the face of the emerging political clout of Dalits and OBCs who were beginning to challenge the
implicit upper-caste monopolies of large sections of Indian administration as exemplified by the emergence of such leaders as Lalu Prasad Yadav, Mulayam Singh Yadav, Ram Vilas Paswan, Kanshi Ram, the formation of Dalit Panthers, the so-called KHAM (Khistariya, Harijan, Adivasi, Muslim) equation of the Solanki-led Congress government of Gujarat and so on. This was also paralleled by growing anti-reservation riots and caste based violence in several parts of North India, including states like Gujarat, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh etc. What such a pattern explicitly indicates is that the growth of a virulent Hindu Nationalism which projects a hostile, Muslim ‘other’ as its avowed target, is also the product of entrenched tensions within the Hindu society owing to the destabilization of prevalent caste-hierarchies and consequent changes in social composition. This is precisely why Hindu fundamentalism may be seen as chiefly an upper-caste phenomenon which however often co-opts other castes within its fold and projects the internal tensions within the Hindu community onto the external presence of religious minorities in a classic case of displaced aggression. This is precisely why Ornith Shani argues that

As some segments of the lower and backward castes appeared to improve their economic situation, forward-caste Hindus feared that their own opportunities were being restricted and their dominance challenged. They were now suddenly forced to compete with the lower castes, of lesser status, on terms that they perceived to be disadvantageous. The intensification of communal antagonism since the 1980s reflected the resulting and growing uncertainties within the Hindu moral order. (Shani 12)

It is these uncertainties that suddenly manifested themselves on a nation-wide scale following the Union Government’s decision to accept the recommendations of the Mandal Commission Report which had been submitted to the government in 1980. The Report recommended 27 percent reservation for OBCs in case of government jobs and seats in colleges and universities, along with the pre-existing 22.5 percent reservation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The Report of the commission was both an acknowledgment of postcolonial subalternization on the basis of caste, in post-

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48 A political leader from the OBC community and former Chief Minister of Bihar
49 A political leader from the OBC community in Uttar Pradesh and also former Chief Minister of U.P.
50 A political leader from OBC community in Bihar.
51 Kanshi Ram is the founder of Bahujan Samaj Party, a political organization championing dalit rights and the other three are Backward Caste leaders with substantial electoral support.
independence India, as well as a concerted administrative attempt to include certain sections of those subalternized communities within the circuit of democratic rights and resources, from which they had remained disbarred. The government announced the implementation of these recommendations in August 1990 and this in turn sparked countrywide protests and agitations against the recommendations of the Commission, especially from students, leading to strikes, rioting, arson, looting and various kinds of untoward incidents contributing to both loss of private and public property as well as loss of lives. The most sensational of these events of course involved the self-immolation of upper-caste students like Rajiv Goswami, which was also followed by several such immolation bids by various other individuals. While there was widespread media coverage of these events and active public debate on this issue, none of the major political parties, including BJP, actually came out in open opposition of this decision, fearing substantial loss of electoral support. Therefore, despite the ideological opposition to such caste-based reservations, as already illustrated, there was no overt opposition, even though party leaders like Arun Shourie continued to vituperate against the decision through his columns in the *Indian Express* and local leaders in various regions helped to organise anti-Mandal Commission protests. Such theoretical and practical doublespeak actually highlights the dilemma faced by the Sangh parivar when they were both trying to consolidate their original upper-caste base and yet sought to create a pan-Hindu mass base for electoral success in the future. Swapan Dasgupta, an eminent journalist, identified this very dilemma and explained how the focus on the Mandal Commission meant a vital blow against the Sanskritising, pan-Indian logic of the Ramjanmabhoomi movement. As someone who was mindful of “the crucial importance of regenerated Hindu society as the central pillar of Indian nationalism” (Engineer 256), Dasgupta’s concern for BJP and probable electoral setback and the blow to the Ramjanmabhoomi agitation, however bloody its trail, was as natural as his opposition to the Mandal Commission. What is more crucial, however, is the final assessment of Dasgupta, in this particular article, which was uncannily prescient:

"The fragmentation of India, it would seem, can only be arrested by creating alternative focal points of national consolidation that will relegate caste identity to the background. It is in this context
that the movement in Ayodhya is of critical importance. The defeat of the BJP on this issue will, in one important sense, only aggravate the crisis of Indian nationalism. (Engineer 257)

The obvious response to such sophisticated and calculated bigotry is of course to point out the violence and mayhem initiated by the Ramjanmabhoomi agitation and how it rent apart the secular fabric of India and thus endangered the basic condition of Indian nationalism through systematic slaughter, mutilation and uprooting of countless Indian Muslims. But what is more important to note here is that the entire Sangh Parivar seemed to share the opinions and concerns of Dasgupta as not only did BJP withdraw its support to the V.P.Singh government soon after (23rd October 1990), but Advani also launched his notorious rath-yatra (25th September 1990) which created that hysterical wave of Hindu nationalism, transcending the contradictions of caste, that culminated in the destruction of the Babri Masjid and the consequent communal carnage across the whole of India. In other words, the vehement vigour behind the triumphal march of the communal discourse around Ramjanmbhoomi and Babri Masjid, gained topical impetus from the Mandal Commission controversy which endowed it with an aggression born of existential insecurity, the fury of a cornered beast.

It is precisely in such a context that Karnad makes his theatrical intervention with Tale-Danda, a play that looks at the history of Twelfth century Karnataka, especially the anti-caste movement of Basavanna, and not only exposes the violent ruptures within the so-called Hindu society but explores the persistent problem of caste-based subalternization and the violent strife caused by all attempts at subaltern self-assertion that sought to modify or abolish the institution of caste and the material realities of such hierarchization. Through Basavanna and his subaltern followers, Karnad offers a complex exploration of the issue of caste-based subalternization in post-independence India and the conflicts born out of the dominant sections’ refusal to part with or share their privileges. Re-appropriation of history thus becomes the site for a critique of dominant revivalist Brahmanical Hinduism and its violent potentialities as well as the exploration of possible subaltern responses to the consolidation of such menace.
The Significance of Basavanna

The life and works of Basavanna in fact represents one of the crucial episodes in the prehistory of organised Hinduism which points to the fundamental ruptures inherent in the very concept of a Hindu society by foregrounding the violence that marks any attempt to transcend the entrenched boundaries. The fact is that despite being a Brahman, Basavanna, from a very early age had developed a religiosity that sought to transcend the rituals and structures of orthodox Brahmanical practices. Having refused to be a part of the ceremony of wearing the sacred thread, a symbol of the caste-hierarchy, he left home to go to Kudala Sangama, where he pursued his theological studies under the guidance of Ishanya Guru, who preferred Lingadharana to Vedic rituals and thus consolidated his revolutionary monotheistic religiosity which not only glorified manual labour but sought to abolish all casteist distinctions based on an egalitarian worshipping of Siva. It was a remarkable manifestation of radical dissent against Brahmanical rigidity that challenged both casteist and gendered hierarchies and Basava’s vachanas are powerful examples of such radical re-ordering. Through his devotional verses one witnesses not only the fervent passion of a true devotee but also the condemnation of a caste-ridden society that could ignore the basic humanity of all individuals:

The man who slays is a pariah
The man who eats the carrion is a low-caste person
Where is the caste here – where?
Our Kudala Sanga’s sharana
Who loves all living things
He is the well-born one. (qtd. in Thipperudraswamy 34)

He, in fact cited the lineages of several sages and seers to prove the very futility of such caste-divisions and the irrationality behind consequent patterns of discrimination and exploitation:

Vyasa is a fisherman’s son,
Markandeya of an outcaste born,
Mandodari the daughter of a frog;
O, look not for caste; in caste
What were you in the past?...
The Veerasaiva identity was thus posited by Basavanna as an alternate source of both material and spiritual existence, devoid of caste division and these alternate visions were strengthened by such spaces as that of the ‘Anubhav Mantapa’, a socio-religious academy set up by Basavanna which hosted people from various sections and castes of society. While on the one hand such an action served to break the monopoly of Brahmans on education and learned theological discourses, it was complemented by a simultaneous celebration of manual labour which again sought to endow dignity to those sections of the society who had remained subjected to Brahmanical humiliation on account of the menial tasks they had to be engaged in. His sharanas therefore freely adopted myriad professions and vocations and all of them could sit and deliberate equally with Basavanna in the ‘Anubhava Mantapa’, as opposed to the caste-based allotment of professions and consequent stratifications prevalent in orthodox societies. In an eminent vachana, Basavanna’s passionate identification with such labouring classes becomes obvious as he states:

A broom in hand, a cloth-ring on my head
I am household drudge’s son,
O Kudala Sangama Lord
I am the son of a servant-maid
Who comes up with the dowered bread. (qtd. in Thipperudraswamy 39)

Such identification was also possible because of the concept of ‘Kayaka is Kailasa’ which posited selfless manual labour as a form of divine worship. This again subverted the dictates of Brahmanical categorisation of professions according to castes and the attendant vilification of manual labour. As Thipperudraswamy explains, “…Kayaka cuts at the root of traditional Varna or caste hierarchy, embodying in itself the principles of the equality of all men and also the dignity of labour” (Thipperudraswamy 41).

Most significantly, Basavanna not only spoke against caste-distinctions in society but actively sought to disregard them altogether by even proclaiming the validity of inter-
caste marriages between sharana families who had supposedly lost their caste identities after their initiation into the Veerasaiva religion:

Who is born in the Siva’s lore, free from rebirth is he;
Uma his mother, Rudra his sire, and verily the Siva fold his tribe,
So I will take the leftovers at their place
And I shall give my daughter to them
For I believe in your devotees,
O Lord of the Meeting Rivers. (qtd. in Omvedt 18)

This proposition of inter-caste marriages is still as radical as before. As India continues to grapple with ‘Khap’\textsuperscript{52} killings and ‘honour’ killings perpetrated against lovers or married couples from different castes, Basavanna’s proposition remains a daring interrogation of the fundamental prejudices of our caste-ridden society as he sought to posit the Veerasaiva identity as one which could erase the distinctions of caste. What is even more significant is the fact that Basavanna’s proposal was not just theoretical: he actually presided over the marriage between the daughter of Madhuvaresa, a former Brahman turned Sharana, and the son of Haralayya, a former untouchable. Even though Basavanna was at that time the Minister of Finance in Bijnal’s kingdom, this marriage invoked the ire of the upper-castes to such an extent that both Madhuvaresa and Haralayya were brutally executed after being chained to the legs of an elephant which dragged them to their death. Re-appropriating this violent upper-caste backlash against Basavanna’s egalitarian mission, with its attempted abolition of caste, becomes Karnad’s strategy for a trenchant critique of dominant Hindutva and the attendant consolidation of upper-caste forces, especially in the backdrop of the upheaval against the recommendations of the Mandal Commission and its intended attempt to include subalternized sections within the “long road to hegemony” (Spivak, Critique 310) – a re-appropriation that remains hauntingly relevant even now.

**Karnad’s Dramatisation of History**

In an article on the self-consciousness of Dalits as subalterns, Cosimo Zene remarks,

\textsuperscript{52} The term refers to caste based panchayat systems; certain khaps in U.P. and Haryana have recently ordered killings on account of inter-caste affairs or marriages.
Our main concern is that at the basis of their subalternity there lies an ideology defining them as less than human, which is then translated and ramified in very concrete terms in the daily life of Dalits. For them subalternity becomes a spatial/territorial, economic, social, educational, and, above all, religious/ontological segregation. (Zene 88)

This segregation, which we continue to witness in modern India, is of course a continuation of age-old exclusionary practices and Karnad’s play begins with the foregrounding of this particular segregation, through the conversation between Jagadeva, a Brahman turned into a sharana and Mallibomma, a sharana who belonged to the lower-castes:

Jagadeva: Come in.
Mallibomma: Don’t be silly. I shouldn’t have even stepped into this Brahman street. And you want me to come into your house? No, thank you.
Jagadeva: Come on. Let’s show them.
Mallibomma: You go in now. I’d better return home too. (Karnad: 1, 8-9)

Mallibomma’s reluctance is based on the acute knowledge of the kind of disapproval, outrage and revulsion that may be caused by the supposed contamination of Brahman households due to the entry of a lower-caste or untouchable individual. There are several instances, throughout Indian history, of how untouchables or lower-castes were either forced to reside outside the limits of the town or the village and how even the mere shadow of an untouchable was considered to be polluting. His misgivings are immediately confirmed as Bhagirathi promptly tells him: “This is a Brahman household. Do you mind standing a little aside so the women of the house can move about freely”? (Karnad: 1, 9). Such questions obviously serve to reinforce caste-relations and more importantly, it suggests that the adoption of the identity of a sharana is not enough to transcend caste-barriers as others continue to refer back to that same identity which is deemed to be inalienable. Even when, Amba, Jagadeva’s mother, asks him to come in, she categorically states, “My son won’t come into the house unless you do. So, come in please. I’ll have the house purified later (Karnad: 1, 10).” Once again the logic of territorial segregation and contamination that define caste-relations is reinforced, without any regard for Mallibomma’s sharana identity, and inclusion is only offered as a

53 All subsequent textual references are from this edition.
reluctant concession that must be followed by ritual purification. In the process, the house again becomes another symbolic microcosmic representation of the macrocosm of India, which remains fractured by the infinite divisions of caste and the exclusionary practices they generate.

Also quite interesting about the opening tableau, is the different reactions of both Jagadeva and Mallibomma regarding their caste-identities. Even as Jagadeva seeks to openly demonstrate their identity as sharanas and the consequent disregard for caste-distinctions and tries to forcibly drag Mallibomma into his house, throughout the entire process, Mallibomma himself remains, ‘mortified’, ‘horrified’ or ‘half-dead with embarrassment’ (Karnad: 1, 8-10). His reactions represent the entrenched nature of caste-divisions and how, despite the adoption of his sharana identity he still remains interpellated by the Brahmanical discourse of caste and the restrictions and segregations inherent in it. Thus we see that while the rejection of orthodox Brahmanical caste-based identities has placed both Jagadeva and Mallibomma within subaltern groups, their attitudes remain sharply divergent, signifying differing levels in the development of consciousness. It is important in this context to refer to Gramsci’s own ‘methodological criteria’ for subaltern historiography:

1. the objective formation of the subaltern class through the developments and changes that took place in the economic sphere; the extent of their diffusion; and their descent from other classes that preceded them;
2. their passive or active adherence to the dominant political formations; that is, their efforts to influence the programs of these formations with demands of their own;
3. the birth of new parties of the ruling class to maintain control of the subaltern classes;
4. the formations of the subaltern classes themselves, formations of a limited and partial character;
5. the political formations that assert the autonomy of the subaltern classes, but within the old framework;
6. the political formations that assert complete autonomy, etc. (Gramsci, *Selections* 52)

As Marcus Green cogently explains, this does not simply refer to methodological criteria but also the phased development of subaltern groups. Citing one of Gramsci’s own statements, Green states:
This is not a complete, ahistorical, or essentialist methodology since Gramsci contends that these phases of study could be more detailed with intermediate phases and combinations of phases, and he states: “The historian must record, and discover the causes of, the line of development towards integral autonomy, starting from the most primitive phases” (Notebook 25, §5; 1971, 52). From this statement one can deduce that these six phases do not just represent the methodology of the subaltern or integral historian, but also represent the phases in which a subaltern group develops, from a “primitive” position of subordination to a position of autonomy. That is, the phases represent the sequential process in which a subaltern group develops and grows into a dominant social group or, in other instances, is stopped in its ascent to power by dominant social groups or political forces. (Green 9-10)

This is crucially important for the understanding of the play and its dynamics. Following this logic, we can argue that while Basavanna’s followers collectively represent one of the political formations of subalterns that assert their autonomy, beyond the discriminatory and exploitative structures of orthodox Brahmanism, it is quite obvious that not all of its members have reached the same level of consciousness as represented by the differing attitudes of Jagadeva and Mallibomma. Similar differences and consequent lack of unity would become all the more visible in the later scenes and it is such lack of consciousness and unity that would lead to the prevention of subalterns’ ascent to power by ‘dominant social groups or political forces’, here constituted by the Brahmanical orthodox upholders of ‘sanatan dharma’. Seen in the context of post-independence India, the large population of the *sharanas* represents both the consolidation of anti-Brahmanical subaltern collectivities, gathering steam in different parts of the country, under the umbrella of different organizations, as well as the ruptures within their ranks in terms of their ideological allegiance and chosen course of action.

Following this Gramscian pattern, it can be argued that it is the proposed marriage between Sheelavanta, the son of a tanner and a former untouchable turned *sharana*, and Kalavati, daughter of a former Brahman turned *sharana* that renders inevitable the conflict between the dominant and subaltern sections and also uneartns in the process the fractures within subaltern groups, in terms of uneven development of consciousness, which hastens the process towards a catastrophe. It is this fact which is consistently foregrounded, even before the central crisis erupts, through a series of dialogues that alert
us to this contradiction, as exemplified by the following exchange between Basavanna and Bijjala:

Basavanna: For a *sharana*, physical parentage is of no consequence. A person is born truly only when the guru initiates him into a life of knowledge.

Bijjala: That’s what you believe. As a child you tore up the sacred thread and ran away from home. Birth, caste, creed mean nothing to you. But don’t you delude yourself about your companions, friend. If you really free them from the network of brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, uncles and second cousins, and let them loose in a casteless society, they will merely sputter about like a pile of fish on the sands and die. (Karnad: 1, 27)

Bijjala’s practical considerations serve as a foil to the ideal vision of Basavanna. We should not, however, suppose Bijjala to be a representative of the orthodoxy. In fact, being actually a barber by caste, King Bijjala remains acutely aware of the significance of Basavanna’s movement. He clearly confesses:

I am a Kalachurya. Katta churra. A barber…you ask the most innocent child in my empire, what is Bijjala, son of Kalachurya Permadi, by caste? And the instant reply will be: a barber! One’s caste is like the skin on one’s body. You can peel it off top to toe, but when the new skin forms, there you are again: a barber – a shepherd – a scavenger. (Karnad: 1, 21)

The seemingly ontological essence of caste is thus deemed impervious to man’s conscious attempt at any refashioning of self. Despite being a king, the source of sovereign power, Bijjala remains fettered by his caste-identity, a source of abiding humiliation, and also typifies the response of many lower-caste and outcaste individuals who, confronted with the seeming permanence of the caste-system, seek to prosper by accepting and manipulating it, rather than by challenging or transgressing it. By frankly admitting how his ancestors had either married into Kshatriya families or bribed Brahman priests to gain the identity of kshatriyas, Bijjala exemplifies how certain individuals and families, despite facing discrimination owing to the caste system, can seek to eliminate their subalternity simply by accepting and then manipulating the system to attain dominant positions, even as thousands of others, including members of their own castes continue to be subalternized by the same system. As opposed to such selfish, unscrupulous opportunism, Basavanna and his ardent associates, as those representing the most highly evolved group of subalterns, offer an idealized revolutionary vision of a casteless society where an individual’s human worth is all that matters:
In all my sixty-two years, the only people who have looked me in the eye without a reference to my lowly birth lurking deep in their eyes are the sharanas: Basavanna and his men. They treat me as – as what? – (Almost with a sense of wonder) as a human being. Basavanna wants to eradicate the caste structure, wipe it off the face of the earth. Annihilate the varna system. What a vision! And what prodigious courage! And he has the ability. Look at those he has gathered around him: poets, mystics, visionaries. And nothing airy-fairy about them, mind you. All hard-working people from the common stock. They sit together, eat together, argue about God together, indifferent to caste, birth or station. (Karnad: 1, 21)

Such a gathering, whether in Basavanna’s house or in his Anubhava-Mantapa represent a concretized utopian space born out of collective subaltern self-assertion, in search of autonomy beyond the varna system, under the leadership, of course, of Basavanna and his associates. The play however, focuses precisely on the fragility of such a space both because of the wrath of the orthodox as well as because of the ruptures within subaltern ranks – a rupture that is again hinted to us when Guddeva, a domestic servant in the royal palace, despite being a subaltern herself, refuses to visit Basavanna’s house as she does not wish to ‘rub shoulders’ with ‘low caste people’ or ‘untouchables’. (Karnad: 1, 23) A similar problem is raised during Basavanna’s discussions with Jagadeva who, despite being a sharana, reverts back to his caste-identity as a Brahman, in the wake of his father’s death, for his “mother’s peace of mind” (Karnad: 1, 35) and thus proves the validity of Bijjala’s pragmatic caveat. What makes the conversation even more significant is the reference to violence between Jains and Veerasaivas despite Basavanna’s own persistent abhorrence of violence:

Basavanna: Yes, some of our people have occupied a Jain temple there by force. They are threatening to smash the naked idols in it and turn it into a Shiva temple. Things could go out of hand –

Jagadeva: And what will you do when you get there? I know. Rebuke our own people. Hold them responsible. You don’t know how the Jains bait us, provoke us –

Basavanna: Violence is wrong, whatever the provocation. To resort to it because someone else started it first is even worse. And to do so in the name of a structure of brick and mortar is a monument to stupidity. (Karnad: 1, 36)

The significance of these statements can hardly be overstated. Basavanna’s admonitions certainly seem typically topical in the context of the demolition of the Babri Masjid and
the resultant mayhem and they offer a non-violent subaltern critique of the violent consolidation of Hindutva forces, which, as we have shown, was mostly an upper-caste phenomenon. However, the juxtaposition of such critique with the historical context of factional strife between Veersaivas and Jains in twelfth century Karnataka, contains even more radical implications. Paulo Freire, in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* warns us that:

> But almost always, during the initial stage of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or “sub-oppressors.” The very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped... Many of the oppressed who directly or indirectly participate in revolution intend — conditioned by the myths of the old order — to make it their private revolution. The shadow of their former oppressor is still cast over them. (Freire 45-46)

Jagadeva’s rationalization of violence, with its obvious consequences, glaringly evident to an Indian audience aware of the perils of Hindutva, is simply a re-enactment of that intolerant Brahmanical binary which has led to the decimation or vilification of several local aboriginal cults that had been sacrificed for the consolidation of Vedic tradition. Burning with the desire to be the hero of the *sharanas*, possibly the product of an unresolved oedipal crisis involving an overbearing dissatisfied father, Jagadeva’s ‘private revolution’ not only discards Basavanna’s foundational principle of non-violence but also negates that practice of forging horizontal alliances, which Ranajit Guha had discerned in subaltern actions during the colonial rule, by justifying violence against Jains, while ignoring the critique of Brahmanical orthodoxy offered by Jainism. His actions thus reinforce the discursive framework of Brahmanism itself and also corroborate Freire’s succinct summation: “…the behaviour of the oppressed is a prescribed behaviour, following as it does the guidelines of the oppressor” (Freire 47).

It is this tension between the prescribed and the autonomous which comes to the foreground, along with a whole host of other issues, when the proposal of marriage between Sheelavanta and Kalavati is finally made. In fact, when the parents of the prospective groom and bride arrive at Basavanna’s house to convey the news, Basavanna himself is virtually rendered speechless by the unexpected nature of the news and is actually stunned into a tearful silence where he even forgets initially to bless the couple. His reaction is based on his logical anticipation of the fury that would be let loose by
such an act which would be a deliberate defiance of entrenched casteist taboos and would strike at the very roots of the rigid segregation of human beings which serves as the basis of hierarchical Hindu society. At a time when even shadows were deemed capable of contaminating others, such an act was bound to raise orthodox uproar, especially in the context of a society which would not even allow famine-hit refugees to move to the other side of the river-bank for fear of pollution. An anxious Basavanna cautiously responds:

Until now it was only a matter of theoretical speculation. But this – this is real. The orthodox will see this mingling of castes as a blow at the very roots of varnashrama dharma. Bigotry has not faced such a challenge in two thousand years. I need hardly describe what venom will gush out, what hatred will erupt once the news spreads. (Karnad: 1, 45)

His fears are shared by the elderly untouchable saint Kakkayya, who also tells Haralayya,

You know my profession is tanning. In terms of ‘caste’, that’s low, even lower than you, Haralayya. When one grows up that far down, there’s nothing one doesn’t know about the horrors of caste. So I ask you: have you given this alliance enough thought? (Karnad: 1, 44)

Despite the fact that both Basavanna and Kakkayya are staunch opponents of caste-based divisions in society, the marriage seems fatally dangerous to them as they rightly anticipate the punitive violence that might be unleashed in the name of protecting the sanatana-dharma. Their ideals do not blind them to the dangers such a marriage might inflict on the bride and groom and Basavanna is justly dismissive of either the idealistic jargon of Madhuvarsa or the ardour of Haralayya as they prudently anticipate the Brahmanical savagery that others are indifferent to. In fact, whether it is Madhuvarsa or Harlayya or various other sharanas who come to Basavanna, almost everyone focuses on the marriage by foregrounding issues of prestige, reputation, ideals, power-relations and so on, without either considering the responses of the bride and the groom or the fate that might befall them. The following dialogues between several sharanas and Basavanna clearly highlight this paradox:

Sharana Three: So how many more generations have to roll by before a cobbler marries a Brahman?
Sharana Five: Do we mean generations or heads?
Sharana Four (incredulous): You mean this marriage won’t take place?
Sharana Six: All these years you have been teaching us that caste and creed are phantoms. And now that people here are willing to act on your precepts, you want to turn tail? What would the world say?
Sharana Three: We sharanas will become the laughing stock of the world!
Basavanna: What the world thinks is immaterial. It is a question of living breathing human beings. A question of that boy’s life, that girl’s safety. What matters is what we consider right. (Karnad: 1, 51-52)

The proposed marriage thus becomes, more than anything else, a site of self-assertion, an opportunity to flaunt one’s identity, at the expense of material considerations of safety and security which basically reflects an ironic assimilation of Brahmanical codes of behaviour. In *Ramayana*, Shambuk was killed by King Rama, as a punishment for reading the scriptures, to retain the inviolability of caste-laws, at the insistence of Brahmins. Similarly, in *Mahabharata*, the Pandavas burnt down the Jatugriha, including a *nishad* family, to protect themselves and Ekalavya had to sacrifice his thumb for being a better archer than Arjun. Such well-known literary examples, and innumerable factual instances, corroborate a disregard for lower-caste or untouchable individuals who may be murdered, either for personal interests of upper-caste individuals or for the purity of Brahman identity. Likewise the *sharanas* too seem to eye Sheelavanta and Kalavati as pawns worth sacrificing in a battle of self-assertion against Brahmanical laws. What emerge, in the process, are both the need and the absence of a discourse of radical alterity without which there cannot be any revolutionary re-ordering of society. This is why Basavanna warns, “We are not ready for the kind of revolution this wedding is. We haven’t worked long enough or hard enough!” (Karnad: 1, 51). In fact, the response of the *sharanas* entirely ignores either Basavanna’s steadfast quest for non-violence or his celebration of the human body as the site of all bhakti. He categorically states:

My legs are pillars,
The body the shrine,
The head a cupola
Of gold.
Listen, O Lord of the meeting rivers
Things standing shall fall
But the moving ever stay. (Karnad: 1, 36-37)
Instead, either Madhuvarsa speaks of sacrificing his daughter “to forward the cause of our great movement” (Karnad: 1. 46) or Jagadeva and his associates plan to counter anticipated upper-caste violence with covert armed associations of their own.

Such dissension allegorically represents the fractures within various dalit organisations, such as the pioneering Dalit Panthers and various other conflicts that had arisen between different organisations, espousing the cause of dalit empowerment, which thwarted any possibility of a pan-Indian Dalit movement. Commenting on the fissures within the Dalit Panthers which were responsible for their downfall, Gail Omvedt remarks:

The Panthers in fact rose and fell like a flash. Their first split came within only two years, rhetorically structured on the lines of “Buddhism versus Marxism”. Raja Dhale, leader of the Buddhist faction claimed that his opponent Namdev Dhasal was only a tool in the hands of the Marxists. Much of the intense Dalit debate at this time took place at a seemingly crude level (Who is your father: Ambedkar or Marx?) but behind it lay a great fear of being controlled by articulate, sophisticated Brahman radicals. And the leftists to a large degree laid themselves open to attack by their ignorance of the rules of anti-caste discourse. (Omvedt 78)

The failure of the Panthers is only one example of a series of pan-national blunders which have only eroded Dalit-unity and have thwarted a possible integration of Dalit politics with movements of other marginalised sections. Not only were there conflicts of interest between dalit organisations such as Kanshi Ram’s Bahujan Samaj Party and Prakash Ambedkar’s Bharatiya Republican Party, there was also no successful attempt at aligning leftist politics with dalit politics. Paradoxically, despite the typically Brahmanical ideological stance of BJP, BSP even continued its government in Uttar Pradesh with the support of the BJP. This was one example of the ways in which Dalits were being co-opted within the framework of Hindutva which promised assimilation into the mainstream Hindu society as well as social mobility. Such ruptures clearly highlight the need for the kind of unity that Basavanna’s leadership had sought to forge. At the same time, as the preceding examples illustrate, such an attempt was bound to falter owing to the uneven development of consciousness among the sharanas – a fact that becomes allegorically applicable to the fissures within Dalits in post-independence India.

54 The grandson of B. R. Ambedkar and a dalit political leader.
These fissures become all the more prominent after the wedding actually takes place and passes off without any violence at all, much to the amazement of both sharanas and Brahmans. This of course does not signify any drastic alteration in the Brahmans’ mentality or any sudden awakening of compassion and tolerance. As Damodara Bhatta boldly tells Indrani,

The whole city is like tinder – ready to ignite into flames. The citizens have vowed to stop this unnatural alliance at any cost. A hundred mercenaries arrived from Sonnalige this morning, they say. A band of fighters from Tulunadu is getting ready in Kannamma’s house – (Karnad: 1, 62)

This incendiary situation is based on the orthodox perception of an ‘implacable hostility’ between ‘Vedic dharma’ and the ‘sharana movement’ (Karnad: 1, 71), which is discursively identical to the discourse of Hindutva which identifies the Muslim as the hated ‘other’. Furthermore, the preparation for violence and the arrival of mercenaries from faraway places for a catastrophic conflict, in the context of the contemporary politics of 1989-90, also inevitably alluded to the bloody trail of communal violence which was initiated by BJP leader L. K. Advani’s rath-yatra as it journeyed from Somnath in Gujarat to Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh. Almost all the cities through which Advani and his procession passed, witnessed organised communal violence, led by various organisations affiliated to the Sangh Parivar, which as has already been mentioned, is also essentially Brahmanical in its orientation and ideological stance. Karnad deftly combines the two related aspects – organised violence to assert a unified Hindu identity and an unshakeable reliance on the casteist hierarchies, intrinsic to Hinduism – through the voice of Damodara Bhatta:

Nature is iniquitous. Struggle, conflict, violence – that’s nature for you. But civilisation has been made possible because our Vedic heritage controls and directs that self-destructive energy. How large-hearted is our dharma! To each person it says you don’t have to be anyone but yourself. One’s caste is like one’s home – meant for one’s self and family. It is shaped to one’s needs, one’s comforts, one’s traditions. And that is why the Vedic tradition can accommodate all differences from Kashmir to Kanya Kumari. And even those said to be its victims embrace its logic of inequality. (Karnad: 1, 63)

The crucial marriage between a Brahman girl and untouchable is a daring act of defiance that challenges this logic of inequality, just as the decision to implement the
recommendations of the Mandal Commission had challenged the existing upper-caste predominance in both education and administration. But the marriage could take place only because King Bijnala’s silent protection ensured the safety and security of the sharanas despite the violent intent of Brahmanical leaders like Damodara Bhatta or Manchanna Kramita. And it is this tacit support to Basavanna and his followers which invokes the wrath of the orthodoxy upon Bijnala who is placed under house arrest after a palace coup, resulting in the coronation of Sovideva, under the guidance of both Damodara Bhatta and Manchanna Kramita. It is this political crisis which finally bares the fissures within the sharanas when Basavanna conveys to them his desire to go to the palace and meet the king as he believes that the concerted presence of the sharanas would ensure an end to the political crisis. Basavanna categorically states that since the King had risked his future by protecting the sharanas, it is imperative that they express gratitude by standing by the king in his hour of need. The response of the sharanas, however, largely fails to acknowledge the role of the king and this failure is indeed caused, to a large extent, by the sharanas’ insistent glorification of personal identity:

Sharana Four: Betrayal is a big word. But not one to which our monarch is a stranger. Let’s not forget that the palace he’s locked in once belonged to his trusting Masters...

Madhuvarasa: The world is awe-struck at the marriage of Sheelvanat and Kalavati. We sharanas have at last shown our mettle, our indomitable spirit. And after all that you want to land the credit at the King’s feet? I can’t believe it!

Sharana Three: Dynasties come and go. The Chalukya is gone. The Kalachurya rules today. This one will also be gone tomorrow. But we sharanas have built a community which stands beyond political twist and turns. We have built our own, grounded in our on metaphysics, shaped by our practice. And it is enough that we attend to its welfare. We know you’re a friend of Bijnala’s. You should do as your conscience tells you. We shan’t objet to that. But surely, this is the moment to make the four quarters realize that the sharanas do not need to sit and sway in the shadow of the throne, along with you? (Karnad: 1, 74-75)

Such statements testify to the parochial misconception of the sharanas who not only overestimate their own strength but also fatally ignore the consequences of Bijnala’s dethronement, which leads to the brutal execution of Madhuvarasa and Harlayya for the supposedly criminal marriage they had organised, rampant violence and plunder and the eventual banishment of all sharanas from Kalyan. The only person who anticipates these
is Basavanna himself who is also told by one of the *sharanas* that the only way in which they can together visit the palace is either the command of Basavanna or the story of some divine commandment received through dreams. However, Basavanna refuses to accept either path and steadfastly focuses on personal voluntary responses of each *sharana*, according to his/her own conscience: “To tell any *sharana* what to do would be to insult him…Let each *sharana* listen to his inner self and follow its dictates” (Karnad: 1, 75). What Basavanna thus affirms is complete individual freedom for the subaltern to act on his choices without there being any imposition even from the leadership of an organisation of subalterns.

But such freedom can only be properly utilized when all the subalterns have reached the desired level of consciousness which enables them to make choices that are correct, both for them and their fellow subalterns. Unfortunately when Basavanna decides to go to the palace and meet the king and extricate him from the political crisis in which he found himself, for backing the *sharanas*, he finds himself accompanied by only seven hundred and seventy *sharanas*, as opposed to the total *sharana* population of one lakh ninety thousand or even the tens of thousands who had gathered around the treasury to protest the false accusation of fraud levelled against Basavanna by prince Sovideva. Following Gramsci’s paradigm, we may argue that this was an opportunity to ascend to hegemony, in alliance with sympathetic members of the ruling classes, for the subalterns, which was wasted on account of their own lack of unity and their own inability to comprehend the situation in its totality. Not only does it render Bijjala a helpless political captive in the hands of the Brahmanical conspirators but also pave the path for the brutal violence that is ushered against *sharanas* afterwards:

Gundanna: It’s harrowing! A while ago – the kings soldiers Harlayya and took him to the city square. They also brought Madhuvarasa there – And then – then – as the city watched – they plucked their eyes out –

*(A reaction of horror from those present)*

Plucked out their eyes with iron rods – bound them hand and foot and had them dragged through the streets – tied to elephants’ legs…Torn limbs along the lanes, torn entrails, flesh, bones – They died screaming! (Karnad: 1, 90)
Having wasted the opportunity to radically alter the existing structures of power, the subaltern *sharanas* now become hapless victims as the sovereign state, acting as an agent of Brahmanical hegemony unleashes its full coercive ferocity against the *sharanas* and subjects them to atrocious, dehumanizing violence. The prosperous Kalyan turns into a cemetery and even as the *sharanas* flee in several directions, Sovideva’s Brahmanical hostility manifests itself through orders of ruthless persecution that aim to ensure the literal silencing and erasure of the subaltern:

Pursue them. Don’t let them escape. Men, women, children – cut them all down. Set the hounds after them. Search each wood, each bush. Burn the houses that give them shelter. Burn the books. Yes, the books! Tear them into shreds and consign them to their wells. Their voices shall be stilled for ever – …

From this moment all *sharanas*, foreigners and free thinkers are expelled from this land on pain of death. Women and lower orders shall live within the norms prescribed by our ancient tradition or else they’ll suffer like dogs. (Karnad: 1, 101)

There is no mistaking the shrill, fascist rhetoric that Sovideva here employs. This is precisely the voice which was blaring across much of India as L. K. Advani continued his rathyatra, with its simultaneous trajectory of communal carnage, while various other leaders of the Sangh Parivar intensified their Ramjanmabhoomi campaign and the attendant discourse of relentless communal hatred. Bal Thackeray, for example, claimed with impunity, “Have they [Indian Muslims] behaved like the Jews in Nazi Germany? If so, there is nothing wrong if they are treated like the Jews were in Nazi Germany” (Omvedt 91). It is this process that culminated in the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the subsequent communal massacres all across India, which were part of the Sangh Parivar’s ideological programme of creating a Hindurashtra. Thus, through Sovideva, Karnad manages to fuse the related menaces of casteist and communal violence and Basavanna’s ‘Anubhav-Mantapa’ acts as an absent ideal, as opposed to these discourses of hatred and violence. Those ideals could only be realised due to the protection offered by Bijjala which the *sharanas* were unable to acknowledge and it is this failure that paved the path for Sovideva’s ascension and consequent destruction of subaltern assertion. Placed in the context of contemporary India, Sovideva’s triumph signals the emergence of BJP as a major political party, precisely because of the
discourse of communal hysteria, while Bijjala’s demise may well allude to the fall of V.P. Singh\(^{55}\) whose decision to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission had indeed posed the sternest challenge to the Brahmanical programme of the Sangh Parivar. Just as V.P. Singh and his secular-democratic alternative collapsed due to the disloyalty of his trusted associates like Chandra Shekhar and Devi Lal\(^ {56}\), among others, Bijjala too faces his political demise because of the betrayal of not just his son, but other members of his court as well. If the recommendations of the Mandal Commission, implemented by the V.P. Singh government, may be seen as a constitutional measure to include subalterns in the long road to hegemony, the subsequent triumph of Hindu fundamentalism, in obvious collusion with the state, would lead to both an assault on subaltern assertion as well as a process of new subalternization in which thousands of Muslims would suddenly find themselves orphaned, maimed, raped, uprooted and destituted. As Dharwadker remarks, “Throughout Tale-Danda, we could substitute the category of religion for the category of caste, and the terms Hindu and Muslim for the terms Brahman and untouchable without modifying the play’s thematics or its interlocked movements of transgression and punishment.” (Karnad: 1, xiii) This substitution was rendered possible because Karnad was perceptive enough to realise that the same Brahmanical Hinduism that is responsible for atrocities against Dalit, a process which still continues, is also responsible for pogroms against Muslims. The triumph of such discourse, which also entails the cooption of subalterns, obviously signifies the failure of subaltern self-assertion and Tale-Danda, as a play, ends precisely on this note of tragic failure.

However, such failure also gives rise to a set of crucial questions regarding the nature and requirements of successful subaltern self-assertions for the acquisition of hegemonic authority, especially amidst stringent opposition. Gramsci himself points out two crucial phases through which subaltern groups evolve into hegemonic groups:

1. autonomy vis-à-vis the enemies they had to defeat, and 2. support from the groups which actively or passively assisted them; for this entire process was historically necessary before they could unite in the form of a state. (Gramsci, Selections 53)

\(^{55}\) Leader of the centrist National Front and India’s Prime Minister from 2nd Dec, 1989 to 10 Nov, 1990.

\(^{56}\) Both were leaders of the National Front and rivals of V.P. Singh.
For Gramsci there is no doubt about the fact that the subaltern classes, if they are to achieve a hegemonic status, must consolidate themselves as a state which is the natural conclusion of a revolutionary re-ordering of society. Applying this truism to the case of the sharanas we find that the revolutionary transgression symbolised by the marriage could only be consolidated as the initiation of a radically transformed society through the decisive defeat of the militant orthodoxy led by Sovi, Damodara Bhatta and Manchanna Kramita. The failure of the sharanas to arrive in support of Bijjala, along with Basavanna, meant also the impossibility of inflicting that desired defeat which was rendered all the more difficult by the sharanas’ refusal to align themselves with other anti-Brahmanical groups, such as the Jains. What seems to lie at the bottom of such failure is an inadequate perception of the entirety of the process – an inadequacy that is as much present in the characters of the ordinary sharanas as in the characters of Basavanna and other leaders. Gramsci categorically explains, “The modern Prince [the political party in Gramsci’s terms] must be and cannot but be the proclaimer and organiser of an intellectual and moral reform, which also means creating the terrain for a subsequent development of the national popular collective will towards the realisation of a superior total form of modern civilisation” (Gramsci, Selections 133). Basavanna’s focus on the intellectual and moral aspects of his movement ignores the political dimension behind the emergence of, what Gramsci called, “a national-popular collective will” which then actualises itself in the form of “a superior total form of modern civilisation” (Selections 131). Instead Basavanna only defines the organisation of the sharanas as a “spiritual brotherhood” (Karnad: 1, 75) without taking into account the obvious fact that by espousing a religion that opposes caste-based distinctions and hierarchies, he was already involved in a macrocosmic political process. Had this simply been an issue of personal religious beliefs and practices, it would not have provoked any backlash, as evident from the comparative state of peace in Kalyan before the marriage. The marriage meant a threat to the existing power structures and thus intensified the political nature of the sharana movement and its radicalising potential. To effectively fulfil that potential what was needed was an amalgamation of spontaneity and ‘conscious leadership’, which was lacking. Conscious leadership, according to Gramsci, refers to “systematic educational activity on the part of an already conscious leading group” (Gramsci, Selections 198-99).
He further adds that “[t]his unity between ‘spontaneity’ and ‘conscious leadership’ or ‘discipline’ is precisely the real political action of the subaltern classes, in so far as this is mass politics and not merely an adventure by groups claiming to represent the masses” (Gramsci, Selections 198). Basavanna’s refusal to instruct others, in acknowledgment of the political nature of the organisation and the extent of the crisis in Kalyan, meant the ceding of opportunity and momentum to the Brahmanical orthodoxy which reacted with both a successful palace coup and a subsequent backlash of enormous brutality. Gramsci explicitly stated that “Among the effective causes of the coups must be included the failure of the responsible groups to give any conscious leadership to the spontaneous revolts or to make them into a positive political factor” (Gramsci, Selections 199).

The lessons to be drawn from Basavanna’s actions and his movement are therefore twofold: while the cultivation of his values is necessary to combat the entrenched casteist and fundamentalist discourses of our society, his mistakes are to be noted as well, to ensure their avoidance in present and future. Considering the whole history of the Mandal Commission controversy and the subsequent consolidation of communal hysteria after the fall of the V.P. Singh government, it is possible to argue that the implementation of Mandal Commission’s recommendations had posed a threat to the existing caste-based social distribution of power and therefore created a crisis which could either successfully thwart the growth of predominantly upper-caste Hindu revivalism which had already begun to manifest its destructive nature, or ensure a consolidation of casteist forces under the banner of some reactionary movement. The triumph of the Ramjanmabhoomi movement, leading to the destruction of the Babri Masjid and subsequent massacres and riots, allegorically represented by Sovi’s coronation, in the backdrop of a blazing fire and loud screams of fleeing populations, is just such a reactionary movement which capitalised on the crisis and the consequent weakening of the state, and neutralised the assertion of the subaltern classes which was being constitutionally actualised. Like Basavanna, the secular and democratic leaders, who claimed to represent the subaltern classes and their material empowerment, also faltered in giving effective conscious leadership which could have re-oriented the course of both Indian politics and nation. Tale-Danda explores all these issues and offers a multi-faceted exploration of an episode of subaltern self-assertion to create a
consciousness of the both the possibilities and dangers of the present, in the light of the past, and almost becomes a theatrical documentation of the potentialities and pitfalls of subaltern political action.

**Yayati and The Fire and the Rain**

This section analyses two plays, *Yayati* and *The Fire and the Rain*. Both of these plays extend Karnad’s critique of Brahmanical discourses by exploring both the patriarchal and casteist nature of those discourses and the subalternization they effect through the refashioning of inherited mythological narratives. Not only do the plays foreground resistant subalternized female characters but also search for egalitarian and inclusive alternative paradigms beyond Brahmanical discourses.

**Hindu Mythology and the Subalternization of Women**

The critique of Vedic religion and Brahmanical dominance which we note in *Tale-Danda* is also extended to other plays where Karnad probes with even greater incisiveness the subjugation of women as a consequence of such dominance, especially with an astute perception of the intersections of caste and gender. While there is no doubt that the subjugation of women is one of the most potent forms of subalternization in India, we often forget that the material realities of such subalternization are fostered by a powerful ideological paradigm fostered by ancient Hindu scriptures, mythological narratives and the popular epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, which generally portray women in a derogatory light and prescribe a life of docile subservience to either their husbands or other male members of the family. This ideological paradigm is itself a product of our colonial past which served to consolidate both patriarchy and Brahmanical dominance at the same time. The idea of the Vedic golden age when women were supposedly revered has been popularized by both colonial orientalists and their nationalist counterparts even as they sought to negate the pejorative representation of India by other colonial authors who were particularly critical of the state of women in Indian societies. For example, a certain Mrs. Spier, writing in 1856 could claim that

> At thousand years BC Hindu women appear to be as free as Trojan dames or the daughters of Judea. Hymns in the Rig Veda mention them with respect and affection...Even in the succeeding...
Following the same tradition Clarisse Bader also hailed the “Ardent piety, spiritual and ascetic tenderness, complete abnegation of herself, unlimited devotion to her family” (Chakravarti 17) and such other qualities which supposedly marked ‘Hindu-Aryan’ womanhood. It is this discourse which inspired the nationalist historians, like R.C. Dutt who attempted a systematic rebuttal of colonial denigration of Indian civilization by proclaiming the glory of women in ancient India. In his *History of Civilization of Ancient India* he states:

> Do not such passages as these indicate that women were honoured in ancient India, perhaps more than among any other ancient nation on the face of the globe? Considered the intellectual companions of their husbands, as their affectionate helpers in the journey of life and as inseparable partners in their religious duties, Hindu wives received the honour and respect due to their position. (Chakravarti 25)

This in fact was also taken to be a platform to assert the relative greatness of the Indian civilization in comparison to that of the colonial masters, as evident from the following statements of Vivekananda:

> On the one hand the rank materialism of the west [and on the other]...Sita, Savitri, austere religious vows, fastings, the forest retreat…the search for the self. On the one hand the independence of the western society, on the other the extreme self-sacrifice of the Aryan society. (Chakravarti 29)

However, the icons of Sita and Savitri are exactly those patriarchal stereotypes through which the subjugation of women have been perpetuated as such icons have been recurrently used to tie women down to a life of complete servitude where they are denied either rights or dignity or choices or any identity of their own. The repeated tests of chastity that Sita is ordered to undergo, preceded by heartless accusation and baseless condemnation by Rama, are emblematic of this particular structure of Aryan Hindu society which could only grant women a state of glorified servitude, as has been explained by several feminist commentators such as Sukumari Bhattacharya, Kumkum Roy, Uma Chakravarti and others. What complicates this matter even further is the blithe unconcern which earlier colonial and nationalist historians also showed with regard to the
position of aborigine or non-Aryan women within Vedic societies and thus consolidated casteist discourses. In the process, the subjugation of women in India becomes yet another example of postcolonial subalternization as the patriarchal discourse which contributes to such subalternization is largely indebted to Orientalist valorisations of Vedic, Brahmanical glory. Such discursive formations are used to foster certain limiting models of identity that continue to shackle women, of all castes, even today. This is all the more important now, as the televised versions of the two epics, along with a host of other teleserials and popular cultural representations, continue to perpetuate the same models in different ways and thus consolidate those patriarchal ideological structures that enforce women’s subalternization. As Sukumari Bhattacharya states

During the Vedic age women did not have any dignity, there was no recognition of women as human beings. The same is true for other ancient civilisations as well; but their successors accept that. They agree that women were indeed oppressed and in chains; only in this [twentieth] century have they become conscious of their rights. Only we keep claiming that women were revered in the Vedic age. This is not mere falsification. *The failure to know the past as it was thwarts the recognition and remedy of those ancient ills that continue to afflict the present which in turn causes unnecessary delay in the preparation of a just future.* (Bhattacharya 40; translation and emphasis mine)

An important step, therefore, towards the emergence of a more egalitarian discourse, requires a kind of a space-clearing gesture which would unravel the underside of earlier fabricated constructs in order to pave the path for those paradigms of self-fashioning through which the gendered subaltern may emerge out her shadowed gloom. This gloom was as much a product of entrenched patriarchy as it was of upper-caste dominance which meant that the Dalit woman was doubly or even triply in the shadow. Retelling of myths and canonical narratives is therefore of utmost importance and post-independence Indian literary history is remarkable for several such examples like Mallika Sen Gupta’s *Sitayana*, Bhisham Sahani’s *Madhavi*, Mahashweta Devi’s *Draupadi*, Shaoli Mitra’s *Nathabati Anathabat* etc. As Aparana Bhargav Dharwadker explains,

The mythic and historical plays of the post-independence period thus represent earlier times to “stage” the nation in the present, but the full complexity of this symbolic identification emerges only in contradistinction to colonial views of “the Indian past”… These playwrights thus represent the past … to scrutinize the dominant tradition in the context of a pluralistic nation. The evocation
of the nation is not (and does not need to be) explicit; rather, it is an inevitable effect of the restaging of myth and history. (Dharwadker 170)

Such re-staging, again, is a prominent feature of postcolonial theatres around the world where we note, what Gilbert and Tompkins call “the specific refiguring of gender roles/identities and the articulation of a multiplicity of feminisms within restructured histories” (Gilbert and Tompkins 120). Karnad’s plays perform precisely this task as he recovers lost voices of subalternized women, including Dalit women, to puncture the authority of canonical mythic narratives and thus pave the way for a contemporary articulation of women’s voices beyond the constrictions of patriarchal and casteist discourses to ensure a more inclusive imagining of the nation.

**Yayati and the Critique of Patriarchy**

*Yayati* achieves this particular dramatic purpose through a careful reconstruction of the original mythological narrative. As we see from the play itself, the dramatic conflict revolves around King Yayati, his wife Devyani, her slave Sharmishtha and the newly wed couple of Pooru and Chitralekha. According to the original mythological narrative we learn that Devyani was the daughter of sage Shukracharya who was also the royal priest of the demons or *asuras* who, according to the Indian mythology, had been engaged in relentless struggles with the gods or *devas*. Sharmishtha, on the other hand was the daughter of Brishaparva, the king of the *asuras*. Initially both Devyani and Sharmishtha were close friends, despite the differences in their stature. What makes this difference politically and socially significant is that for Dalit leaders and scholars the Hindu myths and legends have primarily been about the glorification of Brahmans and Kshatriyas and the attendant vilification of lower castes and outcastes who have been allegorically presented in the form of demons, ogres, tyrants and such other villainous embodiments of evil forces. Jotiba Phule, the famous Maharashtrian Dalit leader, for example, explained the relentless struggles between gods and demons in Hindu myths and legends and epics in terms of the conquering Aryans’ struggle with aboriginal Indian tribes whom they had uprooted, subjugated and even annihilated. As Phule states

> The aborigines whom the Aryans subjugated or displaced appear to have been a determined and brave people from the determined front which they offered to these interlopers…The wars of
Devas and Daityas, or the Rakshasas, about which so many fictions are found scattered over the sacred books of the Brahmins, have certainly a reference to this primeval struggle. (Phule 27-28)

It is important to keep this context in mind to understand the dynamics of the original myth and the reconstruction that Karnad offers as Sharmishtha and Devyani’s friendship seemingly transcended this very foundational dichotomy of ancient Indian society. However, once when during a bath the wind had mixed up the dresses of Sharmishtha and Devyani, Sharmishtha, by mistake had put on Devyani’s clothes. This offended Devyani greatly as she saw it as an attempt by an *asura* princess to aspire to the stature of a Brahman woman. Sharmistha was so enraged by this accusation that she pushed her into a well from which Devyani was later rescued by Yayati. When Devyani’s father Shukracharya came to learn about this event he threatened to leave the *asuras* forever. King Brishaparva, however, could not allow this as he needed Shukracharya who could revive the dead with the ‘sanjivani’ mantra. He therefore made Sharmishtha and a thousand maidservants the slaves of Devyani and it was even promised that when Devyani is married, Sharmishtha and the others would go with her as her slaves to her husband’s house. Of course the original myth has nothing to say about Sharmishtha’s opinion and frame of mind regarding this decision. Later Devyani is married to Yayati who supposedly had rescued her by her right hand which was a conventional sign of accepting a woman as bride. Both Devyani and Sharmishtha travelled to Yayati’s palace and Shukracharya had expressly forbidden Yayati from marrying Sharmishtha. That prohibition was however ignored and Sharmishtha was allotted a special cottage in a wood adjoining the palace where she even gave birth to two of Yayati’s sons. When this secret is discovered not only does Devyani immediately leave Yayati but he is also cursed by Shukracharya with immediate senility. However he is given the option of transferring the curse to any willing son and Pooru is the only one who agrees. Eventually, after enjoying his youth for a thousand more years, Yayati accepts his senility while Pooru assumes the mantle of kingship as a pious and famous ruler. The *Mahabharata* not only concludes the episode by referring to Yayati’s eventual ascension to Heaven but also celebrates Pooru’s obedience and sacrifice. Obviously the story offered Karnad fascinating opportunities for investigating the intersections of caste and gender in the shaping of the story and with his additions and alterations he provides us with a play that
rigorously questions the very basis of the concepts of virtue and vice, glory and honour, as enshrined in the mythological narratives (Rajshekhar Basu 28-34).

The initial point of exploration is the tortured relationship between Devyani and Sharmishtha which showcases an intriguing intersection of the dynamics of gender and caste. An enslaved Sharmishtha not only continues to fulfil the vow made by her father of her servitude to Devyani but also persists with her relentless sarcasm and vituperation which may be seen as the helpless attempts at self-assertion by a princess turned servant. Sharmishtha’s plight here represents microcosmically the macrocosmic subalternization of the Non-Aryan inhabitants of India at the hands of the conquering Aryans and the grossly unjust, hierarchical, social organisation they had brought into being. This caste-identity is recurrently foregrounded in the initial lines of the plays as Swarnalata vehemently vilifies her by identifying her as not just a ‘satanic’ (Yayati 9) creature or a ‘spiteful whore’ (Yayati 8) but also as a ‘Rakshasi’ who must be sent back to her tribe. Regardless of their role as women within an otherwise rigid world of patriarchal domination which affects all women, these characters continue to sow an ambience of rabid acrimony based on caste-distinctions and attendant responses of insecurity, jealously, vengeance and frustration. Sharmishtha herself sarcastically testifies to this volatile cauldron of explosive emotions as she states:

I promise you, madam, I was not being deliberately nasty. It is just that I am an uncouth rakshasi.

And the situation here…a kshatriya palace ruled over by a Brahmin queen! Confusing isn’t the word. (Yayati 9)

Devyani’s marriage to Yayati, in fact, acts as an example of ‘pratiloma’ marriage through which a Brahman woman is allowed to marry someone of a lower caste, such as a Kshatriya. While on the one hand this may be referred to as an example of upper-caste collusion for the consolidation of their own authority, Sharmishtha also wishes to taunt Devyani for marrying a non-Brahmin which is both a consequence of Kacha’s curse\(^\text{57}\) as

\(^{57}\) According to the original narrative, Devyani had initially fallen in love with Kacha, who was a former disciple of Shukracharya as well as the son of Brihaspati, the sage of the gods. Although the asuras had tried to murder him repeatedly, Devyani regularly persuaded his father to revive him back to life. But when she later proposed marriage to him, he refused by arguing that his master’s daughter was like a sister to him. When an angry Devyani cursed him, he replied with a curse of his own which ensured that Devyani
As well as an ironic negation of that proud caste-identity which lay at the heart of the conflict between Sharmishtha and Devyani. In fact, we are never allowed to forget this politics of caste which is foregrounded through their reversal in fortune, representing the enslavement of most non-Aryan communities at the hands of the conquering Aryans. As Sharmishtha spitefully reminds her:

I had everything. Beauty, education, wealth. everything except birth – an Arya pedigree. What was your worth? That your father knew the ‘sanjeevani’ spell. That is all…I opened my eyes. You had become the queen the Arya race, wife of King Yayati. And I was your slave. (Yayati 10)

It is to resist this abject reversal of fortune and consequent humiliation that throughout almost the whole of the first act we see Sharmishtha raging and ranting against either Devyani or Yayati as she continues to spew venom in an attempt to assuage her own humiliation and agony. Her responses may be emblematic of the kind of defiance which constitutes one of the dominant features of subaltern response. In the process she even questions the basis of Yayati’s marriage to Devyani by arguing that Yayati decided to marry her even without knowing her name because her father’s identity enchanted him with a prospect of immortality that he could not refuse. As she states:

Yayati. The scion of Bharata dynasty. He is not short of women, is he. Women of his own kind. Sensuous kshatriya maidens. Virgins reared for him. But he chooses you. Why? You know the answer. You, only you could lead him to the ultimate goal: a sanctuary beyond the reach of death…He would have gone away, without a second thought – except that he learnt that you were Devyani. Devyani! Daughter of Shukracharya! And Yayati’s manhood raised its head. And all he had to do to keep his banner flying over the world was to plant his flagpole into you. (Yayati 11-12)

Whether one believes Shahrmishtha or not, the fact is that through her sarcastic interrogations, which, as Swarnalata explains, “cut close to the bone” (Yayati 9), she introduces to us another pivotal theme of the play – the subjugation of female identity for the satisfaction of male ego. Throughout the play we find a number of women characters being used either as tools or as sacrificial scapegoats for the fulfilment of male lust – be it the lust for power, or the lust for sexual gratification or even the lust for immortality and would never marry a Brahman. (Basu, 28) The denial of women’s desires and consequent condemnation is obviously a running theme in Indian mythology.
fame. Sharmishtha herself understands this typical female predicament all too well as her own servitude is the result of the father’s order, which itself was issued to fulfil Shukracharya’s demands for the atonement of his and his daughter’s humiliation at the hands of Sharmistha. As she explains to Yayati: “Devyani has her father’s word that I shall be her slave. My father has given her father word that I shall be her slave. And I have given my father word that it shall be so” (Yayati 17). Brishaparva could not allow Shukracharya to leave his kingdom as that would also mean the loss of the ‘sanjeevani’ spell and therefore decided to barter his daughter’s freedom to retain power and immortality through Shukracharya. As in case of Padmini in Hayavadana here too we see that women operate as pawns within a system of patriarchal exchange where it is the men, in this case the fathers, who make all the decisions to which the women must agree. What makes things even more problematic for Sharmishtha is her status as a rakshasi and she herself is conscious of the fact that outside their own world, they were “rakshasas, held in contempt” (Yayati 19). Although the relationship between Devyani and Sharmishtha had managed to transcend this dichotomy and though she loved her deeply, it is the foregrounding of racial or casteist difference which began their prolonged mutual hostility. As she informs Yayati, after their clothes had become exchanged by mistake, Devyani had told her “You poor people. You only have to get into a piece of Arya attire. And you start fantasizing” (Yayati 20). The racial pride of Devyani and attendant condescension and contempt, packed into this one statement, not only wounded Sharmishtha’s sense of self-respect but also tarnished the notion of a sincere friendship between herself and Devyani which Sharmishtha had nurtured. It is this combination of humiliation and agony that provoked her to assault Devyani which, subsequently, through a series of events, led to her enslavement. In the process she becomes the representative of a subaltern character whose caste and gender identity together force her into a state of abject destitution – to quote Spivak, as one who is “doubly in the shadow” (‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ 83). All her invectives are emblematic of her desperate attempts to come out of this shadow and reclaim that identity and voice which she has lost. As she explains:

I snarl because I want to retrieve a particle of my original self. I abuse and rave to retrieve an iota of it. It’s all useless of course. Scream as I may, I know there is no escape from this degradation.
The louder I scream, the more I declare myself a slave. That is the point. I have decided to turn myself into a performing freak. (Yayati 18)

It is this conscious self-expression, born of anger and agony alike, that makes us wonder about Sharmishtha’s motives with regard to her marriage to Yayati and the consummation of their union in the royal bedchamber. As the play progresses, we see that Sharmishtha, having poured forth much of her repressed rage in front of Yayati, attempts to commit suicide by using the vial of poison which was her only dowry from her father. The very notion that a woman must either survive as a slave to fulfil her father’s wishes or that she must end her life in suicide testifies to the abject lack of choices with which women were confronted. However, Sharmishtha’s attempted suicide is thwarted by Yayati as he stops her by holding her right hand. With a theatrical masterstroke filled with déjà vu, Karnad thus plots a situation where Yayati is faced with the prospect of marrying the same Sharmishtha whom his wife Devyani so detests and commit an act that was expressly forbidden by Shukracharya. The question is, to what extent does Sharmishtha manipulate the situation to turn thus? Although she categorically denies any plotting, is it really credible that Sharmishtha could not have known that Yayati would not stand idly by while she attempted suicide? Could it be that the attempted suicide was the one last desperate performance from a self-confessed ‘freak’ to avenge her humiliation through an act that was bound to enrage Devyani? Can this be seen as a desperate subaltern’s last act to assert her identity by reclaiming a destiny which she as a former princess could validly expect? In fact, Sharmishtha herself, despite her many contradictions, declares exactly that as she tells Devyani,

Yes, I got him into bed with me. That was my revenge on you. After all, as a slave, what weapon did I have but my body? Well, I am even with you now. And I am free. I shall go where I please. (Yayati 29)

Even though Yayati reproves her by exclaiming that she can’t fool anyone, there is no denying her thirst for revenge and also the fact that as a slave this was the maximum damage she could inflict on Devyani, whom she sees as her Brahman tormentor. As opposed to any attempted solidarity along the lines of gender against patriarchal chauvinism, as embodied by Yayati and the other male elders, the two women pit
themselves against each other on account of their caste identities which turns them into sworn enemies.

The logic behind Sharmishtha’s rage and subversive actions has an interesting precedent in the reported actions of Pooru’s deceased mother. As Yayati informs him, she was not only exceedingly beautiful but also seemed to be extremely gentle and loveable and was even made senior queen after she had given birth to a boy. This, however, only initiated a spell of mad rage in her as she started screaming and cursing, as though she had gone insane which continued till her last days. As Yayati explains, this was not actually the result of any illness or disease but rather a part of her deliberate plan. He confesses how, in her last moments, she had explained to him that

She was a rakshasa woman and the Aryas had destroyed her home and hearth. She was bent on vengeance and the inferno she had created was her way of celebrating her success. She had made sure that the Crown prince of the Bharatas had rakshasa blood in him. (Yayati 40)

While *The Mahabharata* actually identifies Pooru as the youngest of Sharmishtha and Yayati’s three sons (Rajshekhar Basu, 32; Sarkar 301), Karnad refashions the narrative to sharpen the gender and caste related contradictions in his play. Following Gilbert and Guber’s analysis in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, here too we can assert that the seemingly maddening rage of the anonymous Rakshasa queen is merely a manifestation of the repressed rage which is brought about, once again, by caste-based oppression, injustice and disempowerment. Rebelling against the scripturally privileged logic of purity, her act of becoming a Kshatriya queen and endowing the Bharata dynasty with a male scion becomes in effect an implosive act of defilement and mongrelization that strikes at the root of that logic of purity which rationalizes other forms of violence, carnage and destruction. Both Sharmishtha and the unnamed former queen are quite alike in this particular context: Sharmishtha seduces and marries Yayati as she wishes to avenge her humiliation at the hands of Brahman Devyani while the unnamed queen ends up ‘contaminating’ Aryan blood by marrying into a royal Kshatriya family and giving birth to a male successor. Their actions are desperate acts of subaltern consciousness where their body and sexuality become avenues for the expression of subversive rage. While such acts do not necessarily provide them with either their own voice or a sense of
autonomy, it does register that irrepressible urge for defiance which plays a crucial role in the formation of subaltern consciousness.

However, caste is not an exclusive determinant of patriarchal subjugation of women which subjects even upper-caste women to the same absence of choices. This has already been evident in case of Devyani who is thoughtlessly humiliated by Yayati when he marries Sharmishtha and makes her his queen. Devyani’s fury obviously matters rather little to Yayati and in that sense she too is pushed into that silence from which she plans to escape by utilizing her father’s ability to curse on her account. Despite the fact that Yayati does eventually feel her wrath, she requires the support of her father to execute it and he too only agrees because Yayati’s marriage to Sharmishtha, Devyani’s Rakshasa slave, offends him by slighting his Brahmanical pride. No such favourable intervention, however, is available for Chitralekha, another invented female character and Pooru’s unfortunate wife, who eventually commits suicide by drinking poison. Much like the other female characters, her life too remains marked by an abject absence of choices, conditioned by the same patriarchal chauvinism that affects the others. As Pooru explains, the idea that Chitralekha would choose her own mate was entirely a ‘pretence’ and that “it had been decided long in advance that she should marry the Bharata prince” (Yayati 36). All her life, Chitralekha had been trained for that predestined moment and Pooru admiringly recalls how she even laughed at the several pretensions of her own family members and their eagerness to get her married off to a scion of the Bharata dynasty. Unfortunately Pooru possesses none of the martial skills of his glorious ancestors and it is to avoid his humiliation during the originally proposed archery contest was eventually cancelled. In fact, Pooru initially seems quite unwilling to take upon himself any of those responsibilities that his ancestry bequeaths to him. However, when the crisis regarding Yayati’s curse comes to the forefront, Pooru discards his earlier reluctance and instead attempts to equal his ancestors by accepting the curse on behalf of his father to achieve unprecedented grace and glory. Never for once does he consider what the consequences of his actions would be, especially with regard to Chitralekha. The glory of Aryan destiny for which he thirsts requires as its foundational precondition the erasure of Chitralekha’s identity.
Incidentally, when Chitralekha first encounters Pooru’s withered physique and hears the news of his voluntary acceptance of Yayati’s curse, she is surprisingly proud and happy to have as her husband someone who is as great and gracious as Pooru to accept such a curse. However, once she sees his face and features in the glimmering, flickering light of the candles, she is so aghast and shocked that she is unable to tolerate his presence any longer and forces him out of her bedchamber, only to burst into uncontrollable sobs of agony. More importantly, she refuses to submit herself to the authority of the patriarchal discourse and accept her predestined fate, in accordance with the wishes of either the men of her family or her in-laws. Therefore, even though Yayati first requests and then orders her to welcome Pooru back to her bedchamber once again, she stunningly refuses to comply. Her ‘no’ may even remind one of Cordelia’s ‘nothing’ to Lear’s outrageous demands and signals a similarly potent rebelliousness that shatters Yayati’s authority as both patriarch and king. With defiant boldness, she even adds, “I will not let my husband step back into my bedroom unless he returns a young man” (Yayati 61). Such an articulation foregrounds the tabooed topic of female sexuality which remains absent from the entire discourse of ancient Sanskrit Aryan literature where women survive only as objects of desire and not as desiring subjects. Chitralekha’s assertion collapses this entire discourse on its head and through her Karnad makes a strikingly relevant postcolonial intervention for the post-independence Indian nation which remains predominated by the same patriarchal discourse which continues to erase the very issue of female sexuality. More importantly, her entire subsequent conversation with Yayati acts as a wonderful example of her fiery and feisty spirit as she shatters Yayati’s pretensions and assumptions of authority with repeated verbal volleys and corrosive questions. Thus, she not only establishes her personal space as a woman with all her rights but also throws down a challenge to that overweening patriarchy which Yayati embodies:

Yayati: Do you remember the vows you took not so long ago – with the gods as your witnesses, in the presence of holy fire? That you would walk in the path marked by his footprints: whether home or into the wilderness…

Chitralekha: Or into the funeral pyre?

Yayati (horrified): Hold your tongue! You dare indulge in levity about your husband’s death?
Chitralekha (flaring up): I did not push him to the edge of the pyre, sir. You did. You hold forth on my wifely duties. What about your duty to your son? Did you think twice before foisting your troubles on a pliant son?

Yayati (shouts): Chitra! Take care…

Chitralekha: Sir! This is my chamber. Only my husband has the right to come in here without my permission. Or to shout my name when he pleases. I am not aware I have allowed anyone else that freedom.

Yayati: I apologize. I …(Yayati 62)

Such dialogues clearly show how Chitralekha violates the conventional notion of a docile and obedient wife and remains steadfastly defiant. As opposed to the stereotypical pattern laid down by such characters as Sita or Savitri, Karnad’s fictional Chitralekha articulates with impassioned rage the defiance of the subaltern who no longer wishes to accept her own subalternity. Her rage further shocks Yayati as she states, “You have taken over your son’s youth. It follows that you should accept everything that comes attached to it” (Yayati 66) and goes on demand that she be impregnated by Yayati and thus fulfil her destiny to become the mother of a Bharata scion. She thus takes up the patriarchally appointed role of women as bearers of male children and uses the same to shatter the basis of Yayati’s authority and expose his hollow egotism. And in response to Yayati’s anger, in a moment of brilliant theatricality, she flings back to him his own words as she claims,

Oh come, sir. These are trite considerations. We have to rise above such trivialities. We have to be superhuman. Nothing like this has ever happened before. Nothing like this is likely to…(Yayati 62)

In a stark reversal of the usual order, it is the subaltern who silences the dominant with the latter’s own logic as Yayati stands speechless before her verbal assaults.

However, such assaults are only born out of the untenable situation in which Chitralekha finds herself. Hence her question: “You have your youth. Prince Pooru has his old age. Where do I fit in?” (Yayati 62). Her voice at this juncture becomes that of the Indian everywoman who, faced with the contradictory pulls of patriarchy, finds herself destituted and abandoned in the void in-between. Chitralekha too eventually perishes in the same void as she refuses to live life according to the patriarchal norms and instead
ends life on her own terms by drinking the poison from Sharmishtha’s vial. Bereft of any control over her own life, it is through death that she asserts herself and we are faced with a paradoxical affirmation through negation. Much like the death of Bhubaneshwari Bhaduri or Dopdi Mejhen’s demand for her own death by encounter, in Mahashweta Devi’s ‘Draupadi’, here too Chitralekha’s suicide is an ad-hoc rewriting of the social-text of ideal wifehood as she moves beyond the control of all the male figures, in stark opposition to the injunctions of Manu and other Brahmanical law-givers. Unlike Devyani or Sharmishta, who remained enchained to the patriarchal figures despite all their rage and agony, Chitralekha moves beyond patriarchal control by taking her own life.

It is precisely in recognition of these assertions, however stunted, of the gendered subaltern that Aparna Dharwadker states

The most memorable feature of Yayati – and a striking accomplishment for a twenty-two year old author – is its quartet of sentient, articulate, embittered women, all of whom are subject in varying degrees to the whims of men, but succeed in subverting the male world through an assertion of their own rights and privileges. (Karnad: 1, xvi)

This subversion remains resonant with contemporary relevance because these characters end up voicing the angst, agony and resentment of modern Indian women as well, many of whom, despite differences, still remain confined within various degrees of patriarchal dominance, especially at a time when medieval sentiments continue to reawaken in the form of ‘Khap’ panchayats and their restrictive dictates. As the narrator reminds us,

We turn to ancient lore not because it offers any blinding revelation or hope of consolation but because it provides fleeting glimpses of the fears and desires sleepless within us. It is a good way to get introduced to ourselves” (Yayati 6).

Following this logic it may be argued that Karnad’s exploration of such myths is doubly potent in that not only does he manage to foreground the pervasive reality of women’s subalternization in Indian society but through the recovery or re-insertion of lost female voices within patriarchally inscribed myths, manages to unsettle the discursive structures that have fostered the perpetuation of such subalternization over the years. With the exposure of the Bharata dynasty’s rotten foundations, based on “a corpse, a lunatic and a fallen woman” (Yayati 68), Yayati ends up unravelling the sickening basis of the vaunted
ancient Indian civilisation as a whole, as popularised in nationalist historiography. What is all the more crucial is, that Karnad does all this without ever plunging into easy stereotypes or simplistic valorisation. Instead, even when he allows the subaltern to speak he makes us conscious of those limitations of class or caste that continue to shackle and fetter them. This is also true for most feminist practices around the world where the idea of sisterhood remains perennially fissured by considerations of class, caste, colour, race, sexuality, ethnicity and much more. The gendered subaltern is foregrounded without concessions and retains the differences that condition her many lives.

**The Fire and the Rain and the Quest for Alternatives**

These complexities are further explored in *The Fire and The Rain*, also based on an episode from the *Mahabharata*. It is similar to *Yayati* in its re-fashioning of myths and yet different from its predecessor in the sense that it also offers room for alternate realities beyond the destructive annihilation chosen by Karnad’s other female actors. This however should not signify an absence of usual modes of female subjugation. In fact, as we can see from the fates of both Vishakha and Nittilai, (another invented character) subjugation of women by male family members continues in this play and as before constitutes the dark underside of Brahmanical glory. Vishakha is the wife of Paravasu\(^58\), the chief priest performing a Fire Sacrifice to propitiate the gods and bring rain. The fire-sacrifice is a seven-year old ritual which requires the chief priest to remain within the sanctified folds of the ceremony during the whole length. There is obviously no recognition of the needs and desires of the wife in such a situation as her consent does not matter and what matters is simply her compliance. However, through her conversations with Yavakri, whom she originally loved, and who has returned after ten years of austerity, which has granted him universal knowledge, Karnad introduces into the context of the male Brahmanical quest for power and knowledge the tabooed question of female desire and sexuality which again operates as a subversive force.

This indeed is one of Karnad’s preoccupations. Not only does he consistently focus on women who violate the ideal of the ‘pativrata’ woman but foregrounds her

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\(^{58}\) Although *The Mahabharat* does refer to Paravsu’s wife, the epic does not individualise her as a character and she remains anonymous. In this sense she is as much an invention as Nittilai.
thoughts to create a resistant individual voice that shatters with ease the familiar pieties. This is evident in the case of Vishakha who is endowed with an invented pre-history involving her earlier relationship with Yavakri which however did not translate into marriage – an issue that finds no mention in the epic. Moreover, despite the initial silence and hesitation, Vishakha does surrender herself to Yavakri as opposed to the description in *The Mahabharata* which narrates that she was terrified by Yavakri’s brazen proposal and sat weeping in her home after escaping from him (Rajshekhar Basu 200). In contrast, Karnad’s Vishakha frankly confesses the upsurge of desire she has felt ever since his return with remarkable forthrightness: “I have been trembling at the sight of you these last three days” (Karnad: 2, 121). Vishakha trembles with the prospect of fulfilling long-repressed and long-denied desires and at the same time is terrified of the transgressions involved in such a process. Her situation may be compared to that of Ahalya who is married to the ascetic Gautama and therefore when Indra comes to seduce her under the guise of Gautama, she participates in the consummation even as she knows that he is not Gautama. For this act Indra was later cursed with a thousand vaginas which were only turned into eyes after the pleas of the other gods had managed to dissuade Gautama. Vishakha herself alludes to this legend and while traditional commentary identifies Ahalya as a punishable sinner, her act may even be seen as an act of deliberate subversion that militates against patriarchal notions of feminine servility which seeks to erase female desires. Vishakha herself is a victim of such erasure. Not only was she married off to Paravasu against her wishes – “I didn’t want to, but that didn’t matter” (Karnad: 2, 122) – but she also confesses to Yavakri how Paravasu both used her body and also deserted her for his own aspirations:

> He used my body, and his own body, like an experimenter, an explorer…Nothing was too shameful, too degrading, even too painful. Shame died in me. And I yielded. I let my body be turned inside out as he did his own…I have known what it is to grow heavy, burst open, drip and rot, to fill the world with one’s innards. (Karnad: 2, 123)

Yet, when he receives the king’s summons to conduct the fire sacrifice he is able to leave immediately and for seven years he remains absent from home. Paravasu represents the

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59 These details are also invented by Karnad. *The Mahabharata* does mention a sacrificial ceremony but not the length of time.
archetypal chauvinistic male who uses the woman for sexual gratification and once the need is quenched, or when the need is replaced by other desires, becomes oblivious about the physical or emotional requirements she may have. It is this particular abandonment, however, that also makes Vishakha a representative of contemporary subalternized women who keep confronting the same erasure in their own lives.

However, Vishakha’s subalternization is not simply down to the indifferent and uncaring attitude of the husband – it also involves sexual predation from her father-in-law. During her later conversation with Paravasu, her husband, she states:

Something died inside your father the day the King invited you to be the Chief Priest…On the one hand there’s his sense of being humiliated by you. On the other, there’s lust. It consumes him. An old man’s curdled lust. And there’s no one here to take his rage out on but me…the wizened body, the scratchy claws and the blood, cold as ice. (Karnad: 2, 142)

As Sukumari Bhattacharya notes, The *Apastamba Dharmasutra* claims that “Kulaya hi stree pradiyate”, meaning that the wife is given not just to her husband but to the whole family (Bhattacharya 38). And quite obviously women were seen mostly as objects of sexual gratification, as testified by the *Taittyiriya Sanhita* which states “Tasmadu ha streeyo bhogameba harayante” (Bhattacharya 39), meaning that women bring sexual gratification. In fact, the scriptures have so blatantly identified women as commodities that they could even be given as remuneration to priests during ceremonies or as compensation to victors. In the light of such evidences, Raibhya’s action, again invented by Karnad, seems quite in keeping with contemporary social norms as the *Shatapath Brahman* mentions that “Women should be weakened by being beaten with thunder or sticks so that they have no control over their body or property” (qtd. in Bhattacharya 36). Raibhya also metes out such violence to her as he discovers Vishakha’s sexual encounter with someone outside the family. In the process, Vishakha appears to us as a savagely subalternized woman who has not only been subjected to physical and sexual violence but is deprived of the emotional sustenance she requires as well. Her trauma, again, is symptomatic of the kind of violence many women are subjected to at the hands of their in-laws. In the light of these circumstances, Vishakha’s surrender to Yavakri’s seduction is a wilful transgression through which the subaltern either seeks a temporary refuge or
stages a deliberate defiance. Either way, her deliberate adultery subverts the authority of Brahmanical patriarchy, even more so because it ends up exposing the innate savagery of that notion of masculinity, embodied by the likes of Raibhya and Paravasu, which such discourse upholds.

Unfortunately, however, Vishakha’s misfortune is aggravated by the fact that the ‘warm’ and ‘gentle’ (Karnad: 2, 142) Yavakri to whom she surrenders herself turns out to be as much a megalomaniac as Paravasu and Raibhya. What Vishakha had mistaken to be Yavakri’s genuine love for her, was only an attempt to wreak vengeance on Paravasu and Raibhya with his newly acquired universal knowledge. As Yavakri states, “This hatred. This venom. All this is me. I’ll not deny anything of myself. I want knowledge so I can be vicious, destructive” (Karnad: 2, 131). In fact, the sexual encounter with Vishakha was merely a convenient tool for Yavakri to issue a challenge to Raibhya and Paravasu and thus wreak vengeance. The man Vishakha thought could offer him, even if briefly, a semblance of love and affection, turns out to be exactly like any other chauvinistic Brahman who utilises the woman only for the sake of his gratification and as a pawn in his own quest. In fact, he even goes on to tell her, “It was fortunate that you yielded. If you hadn’t, I would have had to take you by force” (Karnad: 2, 131). Vishakha is naturally overcome with ‘horror’ and warily mourns the agonizing betrayal: “I was so happy this morning. You were so good. So warm. I wanted to envelope you in everything I could give…One thinks one has steeped on to a bit of solid ground – a little heaven – and the earth gives way…” (Karnad: 2, 131). This sinking feeling, this sense of betrayal, lost hopes and sheer disillusionment is something that most Indian women would be able to identify with as the discourse that victimises Vishakha continues to hold sway even today over a large section our population. However, unlike many such subalternized women, who tamely accept such victimization, either on account of fear or because of their internalization of the hegemonic discourse, Vishakha retaliates. Overcoming her initial horror, she calmly pours out the sanctified water with which Yavakri sought to resist the wrath of the Brahma-Rakshas summoned by Raibhya and eventually dies at his hands. Despite being unable to make any substantial improvement in her own life, a disillusioned and embittered Vishakha employs the logic of vengeance against Yavakri himself and ensures his death. Unlike the epic which describes this action as being one
committed by an illusory female entity created by Raibhya (Rajshekhar Basu 200), Karnad gives the agency to the disillusioned and abandoned subaltern woman. The subaltern remains a subaltern, but only after a lethal blow – a blow that manifests desperate self-assertion.

Like Vishakha, the subalternization of women is also represented by Nittilai, another invented character, who also differs from Vishakha on account of the differences in her perspective brought about by her identity as a tribal woman who is beyond the sway of the hegemonic authority of Brahmanical discourse. Despite the seemingly pervasive adulation and wonder over Yavakri’s austerities and his acquisition of Universal Knowledge, Nittilai remains sceptical about both the actual course of events and the utility of such actions. She frankly confesses that she cannot understand why Yavakri attempted to perform such severe austerities and even asks Andhaka,

But what I want to know is why are the Brahmins so secretive about everything? …You know their fire sacrifices are conducted within covered enclosures. They mortify themselves even in the dark of the jungle. Even their gods appear so secretly. Why? What are they afraid of? Look at my people, everything is done in public view there. (Karnad: 2, 116)

Her questions undercut that premise of Brahmanical sacrifice and the attendant metaphysical glory which we conventionally accept and seek to demystify their supposed aura, from her resistant non-Brahmanical position. In fact, her questions even highlight the sheer egotism that drives the quests of individuals like Yavakri or Paravasu as opposed to any concern for public welfare, especially at a time of crisis, such as the famine: “My point is since Lord Indra appeared to Yavakri and Indra is their God of Rains, why didn’t Yavakri ask for a couple of good showers?” (Karnad: 2, 116) When a perplexed Andhaka speaks of the apparently greater importance of Universal Knowledge, Nittilai again punctures such inflated assertions by pointedly asking “what’s the use of all these powers?” (Karnad: 2, 117). As far as she is concerned, any knowledge until it reveals the truth of one’s fate or ensures collective welfare, is useless. In the process, Nittilai’s subaltern location brings out alternative epistemologies that debunk the very basis of the Brahmanical pursuit of knowledge. This, in fact, recurs throughout the play as Nittilai resolutely undercuts the vicious logic of vengeance that seems to engulf most
of the principal characters such as Yavakri, Paravasu, Raibhya and even Vishakha. Arvasu, who otherwise remains far removed from this world also seems to be drawn towards the same lethal logic as he battles his own justified resentment against his brother who first forces him to accept the burden of his own patricide and then vilifies him and turns him into an outcaste. It is to prevent Arvasu’s transformation that Nittilai staunchly opposes the ethics of violence in search of an alternative world order:

Arvasu, look at your family. Yavakri avenges his father’s shame by attacking your sister-in-law. Your father avenges her by killing Yavakri. Your brother kills your father. And now you in your turn want vengeance – where will it end?...kick that world aside Arvasu. We don’t need this world. We can find our own. (Karnad: 2, 154-55)

This alternate world order is certainly a non-Brahmanical one – a world where Vritra the demon is privileged over Indra, the king of the gods. As Nittilai explains,

I’m glad you’re not playing Indra. I don’t like that god of yours...When someone doesn’t die, can’t die, what can he know about anything? He can’t change himself. He can’t – can’t create anything. I like Vritra because even when he’s triumphant he chooses death. (Karnad: 2, 164)

As opposed to the Aryan, Vedic god, who has been repeatedly hailed in the Vedas for destroying enemy fortresses and ensuring successful conquest, Nittilai the tribal girl, justifiably privileges the demon Vritra as a representative of the defeated aborigines. Indra is indeed a potent symbol of Aryan conquest over non-Aryan aborigines and his victory reflects the subsequent social order marked by supreme Brahmanical and Kshatriya dominance. Nittilai’s alternate epistemology replaces the same Indra with a representative of those defeated aborigines in the form of Vritra and presages the carnivalesque inversions one witnesses later on. Unfortunately for women, such a simple reversal of binaries is never a suitable answer as both orders are equally reliant on a patriarchal discourse which refuses to grant freedom to women and subjugates them in a life of myriad impositions. Therefore Nittilai, despite all her opposition to Brahmanical discourses, eventually falls victim to the patriarchal discourses within her own community where the men refuse to grant her the freedom to wed Arvasu, a Brahmin. As the unfortunate Arvasu fails to appear before her father and the village elders at the appointed hour, on account of Yavakri’s death, they decide to marry Nittilai off to
another boy from their own tribe and all of Arvasu’s pleas and explanations fall to deaf
ears. Karnad, as always, remains acutely aware of the strange intersections of caste and
gender through which women continue to be subalternized without falling into any
simplistic binaries. Therefore, Nittilai eventually is killed by her own husband and
brother for bringing ‘shame’ to their tribe and family and her fate is symptomatic of the
double or even treble erasure that women are often subjected to. It is especially relevant
to recall in this context the dictates issued by various khap panchayats to ensure that
women do not fall in love with or marry individuals belonging to separate castes or clans
and how several women have recently been killed for marrying outside their own castes.
Nittilai too is eventually subjected to the same negation as she lies “dying like a
sacrificial animal” (Karnad: 2, 172).

The only person who successfully evades such negation is Arvasu who, despite all
the evil machinations of his brother, survives and eventually embodies that prospect of an
alternate world which remains free from that spectre of violence which the Brahma
Rakshasa literally embodies. However, he is able to do so only after he himself has been
reduced to a subaltern position. Even though it is Paravasu who kills Raibhya, he orders
Arvasu to perform the final rites on his behalf and then when he visits the site of the Fire
Sacrifice, Paravasu wilfully demonises him by concealing his own crime and instead
identifies Arvasu as a patricidal wretch. He is taken away by soldiers to some cemetery
where he is beaten and his sacred thread is torn. In the process, a falsely accused Arvasu,
having lost his caste-identity, himself becomes a subaltern. And it is as a subaltern that he
performs as Vritra and thus effects another carnivalesque inversion of the conventional
mythic narrative which undercuts the authority of the Brahmanical and Aryan discourse.
What Karnad thus offers us is the reworking of a myth within a reworked myth and the
Indra-Vritra narrative becomes an ironic parallel to the Paravasu-Arvasu relationship,
especially since the performance does not remain confined to the parameters of the
original myth. Just as Paravasu both kills Raibhya and vilifies Arvasu in order to
consolidate his own authority, Indra kills both Vishwarupa and Vritra, his father
Brahma’s human and demon sons, and seeks to fulfil his own megalomania. Of course,
the original mythic narratives do not offer any such critical reading and only seek to re-
establish the unquestioned authority of the Brahmans and the Aryans over the aborigines
and their literary versions in the form of Rakshasas and various other monsters. It is precisely to negate such ideological manoeuvres that Vritra claims

> They say the gods should never be trusted.

(Laughter from the audience)

Indeed it’s said that when the gods speak to us, the meaning they attach to each word is quite different from meaning we humans attach to it. Thus their side of their speech often denies what our side of their speech promises.

(Applause)

Even their silences have double meanings. Hence the saying that the thirty three gods occupying the heavens make for sixty six silences.

(Laughter) (Karnad: 2, 168)

Such statements and the responses they evoke obviously operate as instances of carnivalesque laughter through which a famine-ridden audience manifests its own disapproval of gods and their earthly auxiliaries and thus shatters the scripturally inscribed fear and reverence for gods and their upper-caste rulers. The process is further extended as Arvasu himself becomes overwhelmed by the mask of Vritra and noting the uncanny similarity between himself and the fate of Vishwarupa, fatally deceived by the treacherous Indra, is animated with an unexpected ferocity that takes the performance beyond its permitted confines. Bakhtin claimed that carnivalesque performances offered “a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations; they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais 6*). Something very similar happens here as well, as opposed to the original myth where Indra successfully kills Vritra and ensures Aryan superiority, Arvasu, as Vritra, not only chases Indra off the stage but in his frenzy of fury even proceeds to burn down what he calls a “befouled sacrifice” (Karnad: 2, 170). His act may indeed be seen as an example of a subaltern rewriting of a canonical narrative through performance that also provides a fillip to the famine-ridden tribals who had gathered to watch the performance. Seemingly inspired by the actions of Arvasu as Vritra they not only level the sacrifice to the ground but even consume the food and drinks set
apart for the gods as oblations. As opposed to the megalomaniac ruthlessness which we witness in Raibhya, Paravasu and Yavakri, who only use their power and knowledge for sinful, personal ends, Arvasu’s performance as Vritra generates a radical upsurge that counterpoints the Brahmanical performance of austerities and rituals and sacrifices with a carnivalesque feast that entirely eliminates the established structures to provide immediate and much-needed relief to the hapless starving populations. Bakhtin further explains,

> In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. (Rabelais 7)

The onrushing tribals, who break through the confines of the sacrifice, ensure precisely such a mass-participation. The performance, thus, not only catches the conscience of the chief priest Paravasu, who dies through self-immolation, but releases an emancipatory energy that seeks alternative paradigms through its radical inversion of Brahmanical structures. Acting, which the scriptures allow only the outcastes to practice, thus explodes on stage with its originally attested subaltern energy and in turn articulates the possibility of subaltern mobilisation through carnivalesque performances which may radically undermine the ideological strictures of established orthodoxy.

Such inversion, however, not only refers to the destruction of the structure of the Fire Sacrifice or the performative inversion of ancient myths but also to an entirely new structure of values. This again becomes evident through Arvasu who not only rejects the logic of violence and vengeance but applies knowledge to the greater good of the people rather than any form of vested interests, in accordance with the logic of horizontal alliances, explained by Ranajit Guha. So, when, towards the end of the play, after Nittilai’s death, Indra speaks to Arvasu, he is never burdened by any sense of vengeance, pride or egotism – much like Nittilai herself and in contrast to the attitude of Yavakri or Paravasu. When he is informed by Indra and that bringing Nittilai back to life would mean the resurrection of his brother, father and Yavakri, he remains unmoved by any sense of persisting resentment or bitterness. In fact, the epic offers a conclusion in which
Arvasu actually attains justice through his prayers to the Sun, followed by the resurrection of Yavakri, Paravasu and Raibhya without there being any judgment against any one of them. In Karnad’s play, however, Arvasu decides to forgo Nittilai’s life as the Brahma Rakshasa pleads for his release and explains to Arvasu that Nittilai will be subjected to lifelong torment if she comes to know that her “resurrection condemned [him] beyond salvation” (Karnad: 2, 176). The Brahma Rakshasa in fact represents the murderous barbarism innate to Aryan civilization which nationalist mythmaking seeks to conveniently forget and therefore keeps repeating in the form of anti-dalit massacres and other related forms of violence across India. Ensuring his release metaphorically stands for the dissolution of that spirit of violence which continues to manifest itself in terms of various processes of ongoing caste-based subalternization. Befittingly therefore, his disappearance is followed by the eagerly awaited onset of rain amidst which the play ends. Bakhtin’s assessment of the nature of the carnival feast stressed these same concepts of change and renewal. He explained:

Unlike the earlier and purer feast, the official feast asserted all that was stable, unchanging, perennial: the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions...As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed. (Rabelais, 9-10)

Through the deliberate desecration of the sacrifice, whose purpose, according to D.D. Kosambi was “to control the new class structure that had developed within the tribe” (Kosambi 100) and the popular consumption of the food meant for the gods, Karnad’s play effects a similar drama of change and renewal at the expense of “the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions”. The arid landscape, predominated by Brahmanical violence, through Arvasu, the Brahmin turned outcaste, and the sacrificial selflessness of Nittilai, the noble tribal woman, finds redemption in the form of the regenerative showers which presage a move beyond the wasteland of self-destructive, megalomaniac violence. Earlier in the play, the actor-manager informs Arvasu:
I’m grateful to her because my babies were starving when she came and now they get a bite to eat every day. Where she gets the food from, I don’t know – but she knows the woods. We would have moved out of this town the day the old man died. But we have become dependent on her. For food. For nursing. For laughter. (Karnad: 2, 155-56)

Nittilai is thus represented as an almost quasi-divine source of laughter, nurture and sustenance – a spring of abundant vitality in a world of starvation, famine and death. It is this spirit which is metaphorically rehabilitated at the end as the world is bathed in regenerative showers amidst Arvasu’s cries for her Nittilai. The subaltern is not only seen as an agent of change but as a source of vital knowledge through which we can find alternative paradigms of collective welfare.

In the process, both of these plays not only offer a robust critique of Brahmanical, patriarchal discourses and the subalternizing processes they generate but also foreground subaltern voices silenced by these discourses. Since the forces of caste and gender which underlie these processes are still active in various sections of Indian society, the critique generated by these plays is of utmost importance in resisting, on a discursive level, the exclusionary and exploitative strictures they foster. At the same time, such resistance also looks forward to certain alternate horizons which must be scrupulously nourished to keep alive the subalterns’ quest for “integral autonomy” (Gramsci, Selections 55), beyond the perils of today.

**Hayavadana and Nagamandala:**

The section begins with a brief discussion of Karnad’s postcolonial dramaturgy as an example of the theatre of roots, moves into a discussion of the role and significance of folk-tales as expressions of subaltern voices and then focuses on *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala*, both derived from folk-tales, as dramatic expressions of defiant consciousness of subalternized women in search of alternate paradigms relevant for postcolonial futures.

If exploration of historical episodes, as evident from *Tale-Danda* and *Tughlaq*, represents one key feature of Karnad’s oeuvre, another persistent theme is the position of women in society through plays that vitally draw on myths and folktales. In fact, even in
Tale-Danda we see that despite the powerful and illustrious presence of Gangambika, Basavanna’s wife, the play itself recurrently highlights the marginalisation and subjugation that women have to face, especially since even the otherwise radical sharanas are as interpellated by patriarchy as others. This is why we see that while Gangambika is compelled to reproach Harlayya by exclaiming “A woman is just a ripe mango on a roadside tree for all of you, isn’t she? Just one more challenge to your manhood!” (Karnad: 1, 50), Jagadeva remains callously indifferent to the plight of his devoted wife and even refuses to speak a word with her, as if any such communication is a sort of betrayal. The pervasive nature of such patriarchy is again evident when, in response to Bijnala’s question about women’s obsession with marriage and family, Rambhavati sharply retorts, “Have you left us anything else?” (Karnad: 1, 22) This consciousness of the “small voices” (Guha, “Small Voices” 3) of subalternized women is further amplified in his other plays, such as Hayavadana and Nagamandala, where Karnad adroitly draws on folk-tales to explore various aspects of female desire and agency which dominant patriarchal discourse generally negates. While Karnad’s utilisation of folk-tales along with various traditions of folk-performances highlights his pioneering role in forging a decidedly indigenous theatre tradition, which is avowedly postcolonial in many ways, such plays also emphasise the inherent relevance of folk-tales themselves which serve to voice those aspects of subaltern consciousness which the sanskritised dominant discourses often fail to register. While the structural and performative innovations introduced by Karnad, in accordance with the influence of folk forms, have been amply explored already, the exploration of the position and consciousness of the gendered subaltern which these plays offer has largely gone unnoticed. This chapter would analyse the representation of subalternized female identities, especially with regard to the patriarchal disregard of female sexuality, through the critical and subversive framework of folk-tales.

Why Folktales?

It is perhaps in acknowledgment of such capacity, which can contribute to evolving socio-political dynamics that M.K. Raina remarks
We are not going back to tradition, as some of us claim. We are in the process of creating new thinking, new sensibilities and therefore new forms. Perhaps the fusion of some of the traditional forms and contemporary struggles may give birth to vital new forms. (qtd. in Mee 5)

It is in this context of contemporary struggles that the appropriation of folk-tales and legends attains a particular relevance of their own. It is important to distinguish here between the larger rubric of ‘indigenous tradition’ and the particular component of ‘folk’. While folk-performances are certainly a part of indigenous traditions, it must also be noted that the term ‘folk’ is commonly associated with cultural elements associated with rural societies, peasant communities and agricultural festivities and mostly depends on oral circulation in regional vernaculars as opposed to the ostensibly pan-Indian, urban, codified, elite cultures, based on Sanskrit texts, including the Vedas, the two Epics and associated legends, which have been instrumental in shaping various dominant discourses on family, the relationship between individual and society, caste and gender relations etc. Collectively, the written Sanskrit texts and their vernacular counterparts form parts of a hegemonic structure which they both reflect and validate, as evident from the patriarchally inscribed figures of Sita or Sabitri, the Brahmanical constructs of Shambuk and Ekalavya and so on. Quite naturally, such documents were written, preserved and circulated because they belonged to, were produced by and ideologically legitimised the powers and privileges of the dominant, elite classes of society. In contrast, folk culture is mostly the domain of those subaltern classes who are often deprived of the means of documentation and representation. In fact, folk culture itself is a heterogeneous field inscribed by prevalent hierarchies which explain how the same basic folklore undergoes modification while circulating among upper castes living within the village and the outcastes who lived outside. Despite such differences, it is indisputable that folktales convey, in various ways, the voice of different subalternized communities who remain away from the corridors of power. As A.K. Ramanujan explains:

Folk materials also comment continually on official and orthodox views and practices in India…here, if we listen, we can hear the voice of what is fashionably called the subaltern—the woman, the peasant, the nonliterate, those who are marginal to the courts of kings and offices of the bureaucrats, the centres of power. (Ramanujan 548).
But how does this subaltern voice register its unique identity? As Ramanujan himself shows, such voices can be recognised by tracing how they reverse, modify or subvert several stereotypes, values and institutions which are rendered sacrosanct by orthodox elite discourses. In other words, folktales exist in a dialogic relationship with orthodox narratives and offer through their specific re-articulations of orthodox tropes a carnivalesque performance that unsettles established hierarchies. To use more of Bakhtin’s terms, folktales operate as an example of ‘hidden polemic’ that constitutes a variety of ‘double-voiced discourse. Bakhtin explains,

In a hidden polemic the author’s discourse is directed toward its own referential object, as in any other discourse, but at the same time every statement about the object is constructed in such a way that, apart from its referential meaning, a polemical blow is struck at the other’s discourse on the same theme, at the other’s statement about the same object…The other’s discourse is not itself reproduced, it is merely implied, but the entire structure of speech would be completely different if there were not this reaction to another persons’ implied words. (Morris 107)

We may recall here the many examples of folklores involving the origin and nature of village goddesses, discussed by Ramanujan, as opposed to the pan-Indian Sanskritized goddesses. In contrast to the docile, mild, male-created Sanskritized goddesses, presiding over auspicious rituals, rites and ceremonies, folktales were marked by the presence of goddesses, who never conformed to these orthodox conceptions and unleashed their fury through large-scale natural disasters or diseases on account of various forms of torture inflicted on them, generally by the men of either the family or the locality. For example, in the folktale involving the origin and nature of the Kannada village goddess Antaragattamma, it is the deceit and betrayal of the husband, which ensures the transformation of the simple housewife into a murderous, destructive goddess (Ramanujan 499-501). Such a tale can be cited as an example of hidden polemic as it not only militates against the logic of Manusmriti with its innumerable restrictive prescriptions against compulsively domesticated women but also contradicts the Sanskrit narratives regarding the birth of goddesses like Durga who are created and armed by the male goddesses and do not pose any threat to a male-dominated cosmology. The text of Antaragattamma mentions neither and yet offers an implied critique of the patriarchal discourse of both through its subversive, corrosive rage and thus enacts a hidden polemic.
It is in acknowledgment of these contextually determined significations of certain genres that Bakhtin and Medvedev remarked that, “a genuine poetics of genre can only be a sociology of genre” (Morris 180). Aparna Dharwadker has followed the same pattern to scrupulously examine how the primacy of women characters in several examples of urban folk theatre establish “an equally unmistakable correlation between gender and genre” that “usually subverts structures of authority and destabilizes status quo” (Dharwadker 328, 330). This is achieved, she explains, through the incorporation of several principles that remain missing from urban realist drama, which deserve to be quoted at length:

First, women in these works are objects of desire as well as desiring subjects, and they want something other than what society has ordained for them. The very presence of such desire violates the norms of feminine behavior and disturbs established notions of propriety. Second, women succeed in their quest because of the interchangeability of male partners. The proscribed object of desire magically replaces the husband in these plays, usually in the form of the husband. Because the men can “stand in” for each other, there is no unique male self to which the woman owes fidelity—a notion that questions the principle of male proprietorship and hence undermines a basic premise of patriarchy. Third, while realist drama emphasizes and often romanticizes the maternal role, folk narratives stress the feminine, but not necessarily the maternal. Or, to put it differently, fertility and motherhood are important in folk plays but can be detached from the constraints of marital fidelity. (Dharwadker 330)

Applying these insights to Karnad’s plays, Hayavadana and Nagamandala, we realise that not only has Karnad chosen a typically postcolonial dramaturgy, discussed by several commentators (See Mee, Dharwadker, Mukherjee et al) but that the form has been synchronized with contents that communicate to us the voice and consciousness of subalternized women and thus offer analyses of women’s role and position in Indian society. The integration of devices from folk-performance genres with folktales thus sets up a fascinating platform for the exploration of one particular aspect of postcolonial subalterneity.

Female Subalterns in Hayavadana and Nagamandala

This significant association between folk-forms and the kind of subversive energy that can flow through them is admitted by Karnad himself, who states,
The energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has means of questioning these values, of making them literally stand on their head. The various conventions – the chorus, the masks, the seemingly unrelated comic episodes, the mixing of human and non-human worlds – permit the simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view, of alternative attitudes to the central problem. (*Three Plays* 14).

Karnad’s statement is also a helpful analysis of his own method in *Hayavadana*, where the central action involving the triad of Devadatta, Kapila and Padmini, derived from both *Kathasaritsagara* and Thomas Mann’s *The Transposed Heads*, is couched within a frame narrative involving Bhagavata, the narrator and Hayavadana, the horse-faced man, as well as several other theatrical devices which are not integral to the plot but are essential to the holistic semantic structure as they generate that plurality of perspectives which helps to foreground the subversive energy of the play, with regard to female sexuality within a patriarchal framework.

As Karnad himself confessed, his primary debt in structuring *Hayavadana* was to the folk genre of Yakshagana to which he was exposed during his childhood when he used to watch Yakshagana performances with household servants. Despite his subsequent dissociation with such traditions and extensive exposure to western traditions, Karnad returned to this form with a self-conscious desire to resolve “tensions between…the attractions of western modes of thought and our own traditions” (*Three Plays* 1). Such a project might remind one of those native intellectuals Fanon spoke of, whose personal sense of alienation from the people and their indigenous traditions propelled a desire to re-discover and reappropriate various forms of indigenous traditions. Fanon resolutely derides such attempts and states,

> He [the hitherto alienated native intellectual] sets a high value on the customs, traditions and the appearances of his people; but his inevitable painful experience only seems to be a banal search for exoticism…past happenings of the bygone days of his childhood will be brought up out of the depths of his memory; old legends will be reinterpreted in the light of borrowed aestheticism and of a conception of the world which was discovered under other skies. (Fanon 178-79)

While Karnad’s own assertions in favour of theatre of roots do have a tendency to fall into such a pattern, the fact is that his plays, instead of succumbing to any such simplicity, effectively highlight what Erin B. Mee defines as “conscious hybridity”
created through a “hybrid dramaturgical structure” (Mee 141-42). While Mee, Dharwadker, and others have scrupulously documented this structural hybridity and the various devices through which it has been achieved, what remains missing from most prevalent analyses is a recognition of the way in which Karnad’s interrogation of essentialist nationalism or his philosophical exploration of man’s fundamental incompleteness is aligned with an equally relevant interrogation of the traditionally enshrined concepts of family and femininity which emerges through a refashioning of earlier narratives. This refashioning proves instrumental in adapting the folktales to contemporary concerns of the nation which require a “redefining of relationships” (Fanon 191), such as those between men and women or women and society.

This is precisely what the central action focuses on through its adaptation of the various elements found in both the source texts. According to the Kathasaritsagara, Dhavala and his wife Madanasundari were once journeying with her brother and in the city of Shobhavati, in the temple of Parvati, Dhavala sacrificed himself at the spur of the moment. When his brother-in-law discovers him, he too sacrifices himself in grief. The goddess however is moved by the plight of the destituted Madanasundari and grants her the boon that both will come to life if their heads are rejoined. In her haste, she switches the heads and both men come to life with the other’s head. The resultant confusion is then resolved with the assertion that “The one with her husband’s head is her husband because the head rules the limbs and personal identity depends on the head” (Dharwadker 333). This original story was later used by Thomas Mann in The Transposed Heads which supplied Karnad with both the central plot and the motive force of the play. As Dharwadker explains, Mann changed the male protagonists into two male friends, Shridaman and Nanda, with equally potent desire for Sita and thus the philosophical question of the supremacy of the head is complemented by the issue of proscribed desire and female agency as evident from the Sita’s final journey to the forest in search of Nanda. While the philosophical questions regarding the incompleteness of all created beings remains important for the framing of the play, it is my argument that Karnad’s introduction of choruses and dolls also serve to foreground the precarious position of Padmini, her desire for conjugal fulfilment and the consequent problems in a patriarchal
framework where women’s choice is virtually absent. It is this thematic and structural framework that endows the play with its subversive energy.

The central problem becomes manifest from the very beginning through the song of the female chorus:

Why should love stick to the sap of a single body? When the stem is drunk with the thick yearning of the many-petalled, many-flowered lantana, why should it be tied down to the relation of a single flower? (Three Plays 82)

This song which functions as a refrain in the play foregrounds that female sexual desire which refuses to be tied within the monogamous bonds that society imposes on her. It is important to note that while the Indian scriptures do sanction polygamy for men, any expression of female sexuality outside marriage is both condemned and deemed punishable, even by capital punishment. It is also important to note that ethical responsibilities are also tied to voluntary choices and herein lies the dilemma of most Indian women whose marriages are decided by male elders of their families without any personal consent. The Manu Samhita, for example, not only condemns women for their ‘impure desires’ but identifies them as being characterised by ‘mutable temper’ and ‘natural heartlessness’ (Buhler, Chap 9). Therefore, the text contains several instructions with regard to how women are to be given away in marriage and how they are to be guarded, without there being any reference to their choice in deciding their husbands. Instead, the text explicitly claims,

2. Day and night woman must be kept in dependence by the males (of) their (families), and, if they attach themselves to sensual enjoyments, they must be kept under one's control.

3. Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence. (Buhler, Chap. 9)

Karnad’s text does not specifically dwell on this issue but maintains a pregnant silence as it elides the entire pre-nuptial episode through the narration of Bhagavata who informs us:

Need one explain to our learned audience what followed next? Padmini is the daughter of the leading merchant in Dharmapura. In her house the very floor is swept by the Goddess of Wealth.
In Devadatta’s house, they’ve the Goddess of Learning for a maid. What could then possibly stand in the way of bringing the families together? (*Three Plays* 90)

Such a statement places the agency squarely in the hands of the two families and by default their male members, while the issue of Padmini’s consent remains crucially absent as the very question of female choice is one which orthodox patriarchy renders inadmissible. As Claude Levi-Strauss remarks,

The total relationship of exchange which constitutes marriage is not established between a man and a woman, but between two groups of men and the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners...In acquiescing to the proposed union, she precipitates or allows the exchange to take place, she cannot alter its nature. (Levi-Strauss 161)

Therefore, the readers/audience are simply told that “Padmini became the better half of Devadatta and settled in his house”. This supposedly happy union is also given a telling gloss as Bhagavata adds “Devadatta – Padmini – Kapila! To the admiring citizens of Dharmapura, Rama – Sita – Lakshmana” (*Three Plays* 90) The invocation of the mythic/epic paradigm introduces us to the sanctified familial structure endorsed by hegemonic Hindu discourses where Sita is posited as an embodiment of purified wifely virtues, evident from her loyalty, obedience and sacrificial temper. We are thus introduced to the dialogic framework within which the play can be read and it is from this dialogic context that we get to analyse how both of Karnad’s plays create a counterdiscourse to the patriarchally constituted discourse of marriage which demands absolute self-abnegating loyalty without affording either choice to the woman or ensuring reciprocal responsibility on the part of the husband. Padmini, as a character, embodies a transgressive subversion of all such patriarchal codes and it is her agency that provides the play with its driving energy.

Aparna Dharwadker therefore remarks,

Regardless of the overall theatrical impact, however, the core narrative of the play resonates in present dramatic and cultural contexts because it gives primacy to women in the psychosexual relations of marriage and creates a space for the expression, even the fulfilment, of amoral female desire within the constraints of patriarchy. (Dharwadker 338)
As Dharwadker explains, this expression and fulfilment of female desire within the play is first expressed through the narrative about Hayavadana’s mother, who deliberately chose an Arab stallion as her husband, perhaps connoting a quest for ideal masculine virility, and then discontinued the marriage when the stallion regained its original celestial form. Such wilful exercise of personal desire is itself a threat to patriarchy as, to quote Gayle Rubin, “From the standpoint of the system [i.e. patriarchy], the preferred female sexuality would be one which responded to the desire of others, rather than one which actively desired and sought a response” (Rubin 547). Padmini also operates as a continuation of this untamed female agency, as evident from her obvious desire for Kapila, whose physical vigour and prowess attracts her inexorably. This becomes obvious during the altercations before the planned trip to Ujjain. While Devadatta, jealous of Padmini and Kapila’s growing bond, tries to postpone the trip, Padmini, despite initially agreeing, later insists on continuing with the trip upon seeing Kapila’s disappointment. This attraction becomes further obvious as we listen to the asides of enraptured Padmini while she admires Kapila’s physique:

How he climbs – like an ape. Before I could even say ‘yes’, he had taken off his shirt, pulled his dhoti up and swung up the branch. And what an ethereal shape! Such a broad back – like an ocean with muscles rippling across it – and then that small feminine waist which looks so helpless…He is like a Celestial Being reborn as a hunter…How his body sways, his limbs curve – it’s a dance almost…No woman could resist him. (Three Plays 96)

It is in this context that the reference to the Fortunate Lady’s flower becomes ironically resonant as it serves to underline the actual dissatisfaction of married Padmini and mocks in the process, the very notion of a married woman being a ‘Fortunate Lady’. Her misery is further compounded later when both Devadatta and Kapila commit suicide which leaves the pregnant Padmini in an extremely precarious position which is further complicated by the fact that despite her desire for Kapila, he actually sacrifices himself in honour of his homosocial bond with Devadatta without sparing any thought for Padmini. In fact, in some sense, Kapila’s suicide, with the hope of meeting Devadatta as a brother in the next life, ironically displaces the rhetoric of immortal heterosexual love between man and woman onto the plane of male friendship and thereby ‘queers’ the enactment. The person who is left out, and is virtually relegated to a life of even greater misery as a
widow is of course Padmini, whose state seemed irrelevant to both Devadatta and Kapila. At this stage of the play, Padmini finds herself in the position of a typically subalternized hapless woman whose lack of agency leaves her as an abandoned pawn in a saga of successive suicides.

However, the daring significance of the play lies precisely in Padmini’s attempts to transcend this state of passive suffering through the exercise of her personal agency which becomes most crucially manifest through the transposition of heads. The authorial instructions clearly state that “in her excitement she mixes them up” (Three Plays 103) so that Devadatta’s head is attached to Kapila’s body and vice versa. But the voice of goddess Kali significantly adds, “My dear daughter there should be a limit even to honesty” (Three Plays 103). This either signifies that the switching of the heads was an involuntary expression of unconscious desires, a sort of Freudian slip or that she consciously mixed up the heads in order to fulfil her search for the ideal husband who would have Kapila’s virility and Devadatta’s sophistication. As a woman who had been married off to a husband with whom she shared no temperamental compatibility, Padmini’s transgressive honesty acts as a subversive act of personal desire that evades the confines of patriarchy and yet secures for it that sanctification which any such expression of feminine desire would otherwise fail to secure. One may refer, in this context to the myth of Ahalya, the wife of sage Gautama. Indra seduced her by arriving in the guise of Gautama and for this she was punished by being turned into a stone. As Pradip Bhattacharya explains,

> These are not simply physical transformations (as in the Grimms’ fairy tale of “Faithful John” or Hatim Tai’s “Seven Riddles”), but a deep psychological trauma, in which oppressive guilt virtually throttles the vital spirit, “freezing” the emotions and making the woman socially into a non-person. Ahalya becomes an automaton, denying her emotions, feelings and self-respect, shunned by all. (Bhattacharya 7)

Even her redemption can only be secured through male agency, embodied by Rama, and a humiliating submission to that authority. Through Padmini’s actions the play enacts a hidden polemic against such patriarchal narratives as not only does she manage to fulfil her sexual desire directed at the male body of someone other than her husband but even secures divine blessing for it as it all happens owing to the intervention of the goddess.
Kali. Padmini, thus, intentionally or otherwise, performs an adulterous act of sorts and yet cannot be accused of being disloyal to Devadatta as the sage proclaims the man with Devadatta’s head to be her husband. In the process she radically reverses the vary basis of *Manu Samhita* and the attendant patriarchal structures. As opposed to the petrification of Ahalya, the trial by fire of Sita and such other examples of punitive masculine authority, Karnad’s hybridized folk drama enacts a typically carnivalesque reversal which foregrounds that ‘surplus of human-ness’ (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 37) which feminine sexuality uses to evade and outwit patriarchal barriers. Bakhtin explains,

> People were, so to speak, *reborn for new purely human relations*. These truly human relations were not only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought; they were experienced. The *utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this carnival experience, unique of its kind.* (Morris 199; emphasis mine)

Through Padmini’s transposition and the associated divine intervention, Devadatta and Kapila are indeed ‘reborn’, making possible a new kind of human relation between Padmini and her reborn ‘husband’ where the ‘utopian ideal and the realistic merged’. The subsequent joyous laughter and the song and dances in which the three participate further reinforce this carnivalesque ambience and this strange ménage-a-trois parodically contrasts the solemn sanctification and legitimation of a monogamous bond that is marriage:

> What a good mix!
> No more tricks!
> Is this one that
> Or that one this?
> Ho! Ho! (*Three Plays* 105)

It is this particular brand of carnival humour which gives Karnad’s play its unique identity and sharpens its subversive anti-patriarchal stance.

However, Bakhtin was well aware of the ephemeral nature of carnivals and carnivalesque moments which do not lead to any immediate drastic material change. If we look at the Elizabethan plays of Shakespeare and Marlowe we would find plenty of instances of carnivalesque moments which, however, are eventually circumscribed within
a pattern that culminates with an assertion of orthodox order, however shaken its pillars have been. Naturally therefore, the carnivalesque inversion of order which Padmini both effecte and enjoyed, eventually gives way to a return of the earlier order as the person with Devadatta’s head and Kapila’s body undergoes a gradual but definite change where the body resumes its earlier delicate flaccidity, commensurate with Devadatta’s head, just as the man with Kapila’s head and Devadatta’s body also regains the bold and muscular physique Kapila originally possessed. As a result, the misery and longing from which Padmini sought to escape returns to haunt her again and finds voice through the lullaby she sings to her child. The glorious image of the archetypal Prince Charming, clad in white, riding a white stallion, with diamond studded sword and a garland of jasmine represents an idealised vision and the sheer fairy-tale like quality of the images indicate a revisiting of cherished childhood fantasies. However, such visions continue to drift further and further in Padmini’s lived experience and as a result the jasmines turn bloody, the eyes become pebbles and the body proves to be deathly cold. In this context Padmini again seems to represent the plight of an Indian Everywoman who must sacrifice her dreams of conjugal fulfilment at the altar of patriarchal dominance. It is these moments that highlight Padmini’s role as a subaltern woman and her transgressions embody that defiance which constitutes one pole of subaltern consciousness. This defiance becomes manifest through the testimony of the speaking dolls, a typical folk device, who give us an insight into Padmini’s psyche and thereby unearth that persisting desire for Kapila through which her transgression becomes evident. Through the voice of the dolls we are given a glimpse of Padmini’s dreams which again attest to her persistent longing for that virile masculinity which Kapila embodied through a series of symbolic images:

Doll I: He goes to her…
Doll II:…very near her…
Doll I: (In a whisper) What’s he going to do now?
Doll II: (even more anxious) What?
(They watch)
Doll I: (baffled) But he’s climbing a tree!
Doll II: (Almost a wail of disappointment) He’s dived into a river. (Three Plays 119)
Although the dolls themselves do not understand the significance of the phallic images, these coded symbols clearly signify a yearning for phallic penetration and their association with Kapila becomes obvious from the earlier images involving Kapila’s attempt to pluck flowers for Padmini during the trip to Ujjain. We are thus made to realise the cyclical logic governing Padmini’s fate and Padmini herself realises how the changes in Devadatta and Kapila have brought her back to that same state of unfulfilment she so desperately sought to escape. In agony and despair she cries: “Change! Change! Change! Change! Change! Change! The sand trickles. The water fills the pot. And the moon goes on swinging, swinging, swinging from light to darkness to light. (Three Plays 119)” She alone remains constant and thus finds herself to be the unaccommodated woman whose desires are cyclically negated and crushed.

However, what distinguishes Padmini is precisely her refusal to passively accept the impositions of society. These impositions are not only implied but are also explicitly voiced through the dolls. Although the abuse poured forth by the dolls is apparently their response to the couple’s decision to replace them with new ones, their shrill responses ironically reflect precisely the kind of opinion orthodox society is likely to have of Padmini, if her secret desires become known:

Doll II: She wants new dolls.
Doll I: The whore.
Doll II: The bitch.
Doll I: May her house burn down.
Doll II: May her teeth fall out…
Doll I: (To Devadatta) You wretch – before you throw us out watch out for yourself.
Doll II: Cover your wife before you start worrying about our rags. (Three Plays 120-21)

But Padmini entirely disregards such censure and defiantly marches into the forest in search of Kapila in response to her own desires whose fulfilment is her right. It is the force and flow of this personal desire which moves Padmini beyond the confines of patriarchy as evident from the remarkably evocative song of the female chorus whose images of river and waterfall offer a wonderful representation of this dynamics of desire:

The river only feels the
Pull of the waterfall.
She giggles, and tickles the rushes
On the banks, then turns
A top of dry leaves…
Sings, tosses, leaps and
Sweeps on in a rush. (Three Plays 127)

In comparison to this onrushing flow, which is equated with Padmini, Devadatta and Kapila are like dry leaves who not only fail to match her vitality but only know the path of extinction, born of self-deluding, self-destructive aggression. Her greater power is also evident from the fact that, as Aparna Dharwadker explains, “In the upside-down anti-patriarchal world of the Sanskrit folktale, as retold by Mann and Karnad in the twentieth century, the men kill themselves twice for the sake of the woman” (Dharwadker 339). However, Dharwadker also acknowledges that her dominance over the men is unable to bring about any fruitful resolution as the men push themselves into a path of irreconcilable conflict, culminating in their climactic battle and death. Once again, as had happened during their earlier suicides, their deaths leave Padmini entirely isolated and abandoned – sentenced to that same longing and unfulfilment. In his introduction Karnad insists that the characters are not supposed to be seen as psychologised individuals but only as ethical archetypes. If that be the case then Padmini becomes the archetypal everywoman whose eventual isolation is indicative of the existential void encountered by many Indian women who find their lives shaped by others without any consideration of their personal desires. The primary cause behind Padmini’s oscillations is her marriage where her opinion and consent were obviously irrelevant and all her subsequent actions are governed by the sole urge to shape her life in her own terms, without succumbing to someone else’s script.

It is this attempt to write her own story which leads her to commit sati as she burns herself on the funeral pyre prepared for both Kapila and Devadatta. This climactic action of the central plot is marked by a persistent ambivalence which disrupts essentialist, monochromatic readings and rather fosters a radical instability which can subversively undercut prevalent dominant discourses. According to the scriptures, a woman who performs sati shows her undying loyalty for her husband and such a sacrifice earns grace and a seat in heaven (Spivak, Critique 287-303). While the custom was
indeed used by the male members of various families to forcibly eliminate women and thereby usurp whatever properties they were supposed to inherit, defenders have always eulogised the custom as an example of the self-sacrificing devotion and spiritual fortitude of Indian women. In fact, traditionalists even viewed the British prohibition of sati, induced by reformist movements from within the Indian Hindu society, as evidence of western contamination of Indian tradition and a deliberate assault on the essence of Indianness. While such typically chauvinistic views were later discarded by the majority of the nationalist leaders, the construct of a self-abnegating, docile wife, whose fidelity and endurance of adversities are supposed to be the jewels in her crown, has persisted for a long time and post-independence India has also continued to consider it sacrosanct to a large extent, as substantiated by a large body of films and tele-serials with stereotypical representation of female characters. What remains missing from such constructs of femininity is any cognizance of female self-assertion, especially in the realms of sexuality, which is anyway a taboo subject. Hayavadana as a play obviously challenges the conventional connotations of Indianness as may be evident from the inability of Hayvadana himself to fit in, despite his “interest in the social life of the nation”, his dabbling in various popular ‘ism’s, and even his recourse to several religious sects of different colours and faiths (Three Plays 81). While the figure of this horse-headed man is used to mock the notions of unitary identity poured forth by the discourses of politics and theology, Padmini stands as an ironic and subversive counterpoint to the tradition of ‘pativrata’ women, such as Savitri or Behula, who have dedicated their lives to their husbands, on account of her extra-marital pursuit of personal sexual fulfilment in defiance of patriarchal norms which demand compulsive adherence without least room for choice. As a result the sati she performs, neither acquires the purifying halo that patriarchy condescends to endow to women who devotedly follow scriptural instructions as truth, nor can it be seen as some kind of deserving punishment for her supposed transgressions, as the whole episode is entirely volitional. This final act of self-assertion, far from reinforcing tradition, ends up becoming a travesty of the whole ceremony as it becomes a transgressive gesture through which Padmini memorialises her extra-marital desire and announces her fatal triumph over the laws that were supposed to shape and govern her life. Much like Bhubaneshwari Bhaduri she too performs an “ad hoc subaltern
rewriting of the social text of *sati-suicide*” (Spivak, *Critique* 307) through the foregrounding of her transgressive desire. It is also important to note here Karnad’s ironic glance at the Rajput queen Padmini who led other Rajput wives to commit mass suicide as part of *Jauhar vrat* to preserve their honour from the invading victorious armies of Alauddin Khilji. While the Rajput Padmini became a national icon appropriated by the nationalist discourse as an emblem of steadfastness, sacrifice, nobility and courage, Karnad’s Padmini mocks that entire gamut of traditional norms and expectations through a subversive sati that commemorates her consciously extra-marital quest for that personal sexual fulfilment which remains a bleak silence within patriarchal discourses. Padmini’s transgressions are defiant subaltern assaults against this very silence.

It is ironic however, that her final transgression actually ends up reinforcing her silence. Her fiery conclusion also marks an agonised, inescapable regression into a zone of unbelonging and isolation which leads to absolute negation. As Dharwadker explains, “[w]omen do not have the power to prevent this downward slide”, even though “they do have agency in the drama of discontent” (Dharwadker 339). Herein, however, lies the difference between *Nagamandala* and *Hayavadana* as the former culminates with a successful celebration of feminine desire as opposed to the subversive but catastrophic fate of Padmini in *Hayavadana*. If Padmini marks the subversive agency of the unaccommodated woman, culminating in absolute negation, Rani, in *Nagamandala* marks the triumphant celebratory expression of female desire which manages to successfully evade and corrode patriarchal authority. What is all the more remarkable here is that unlike *Hayavadana*, which deals with a refashioned folktale, modified by Mann and Karnad, *Nagamandala* depends directly on two folktales from Karnataka, heard by Karnad from A.K. Ramanujan, which have been utilised in the play without much alteration. As Ramanujan has himself explained, in his discussion of such folktales, these tales fall into the category of ‘women’s tales’, that is tales told by women and tales centred around women (Ramanujan 423) which collectively constitute a ‘counter system’ that presents “an alternative way of looking at things” (Ramanujan 446). What such a counter-system achieves is the foregrounding of a subversive feminine agency that manages to challenge patriarchal authority through tales that deal with the domestic issues and concerns of women, and fall into the category of *akam* (interior) tales, as
opposed to the puram (exterior) tales that are often narrated by male professional singers or performers and reflect predominant patriarchal ethos. As Ramunajan boldly claims, “Genders are genres. The world of women is not the world of men” (Ramanujan 446). *Nagamandala*, as a play, emphasises both the feminine origin of such counter-discursive narratives as well as the subversive subaltern voice they are able to foreground.

This issue of the feminine production of folk-tales and the consequent gendered dimensions of the genre are evident from the very beginning as we note the gathering of the animated, personified flames, who, significantly enough, are endowed with ‘female voices’. The entire setting of a gathering of flames with female voices who gather in the temple for a gossip session after the whole village has fallen asleep, allegorically represents a rare congregation of otherwise silenced, unheard female voices that generally find no place within the public domain. The gathering becomes, in effect, following Bakhtin, “a second world and a second life” (Morris 197) of female voices all of which however focus exclusively on *akam* issues as it is the domestic realm to which the women were mostly confined. The notion of carnival is again important here as we note that the conversation of the flames is marked by candid dialogues dealing with bawdy physical details without any hindrance, just as described by Bakhtin as one of the cardinal features of carnival laughter. The following dialogues between two flames serves as an apt example of such uninhibited conversation:

**Flame 4:** My master had an old ailing mother. Her stomach was bloated, her back covered with bed sores. The house stank of cough and phlegm, pus and urine. No one got a wink of sleep at night. Naturally, I stayed back too. The old lady died this morning, leaving behind my master and his young wife, young and juicy as a tender cucumber. I was chased out fast.

(Giggles)

**Flame 3:** You are lucky. My master’s eyes have to feast on his wife limb by limb if the rest of him is to react. So we lamps have to bear witness to what is better left to the dark. (*Three Plays* 24)

Bakhtin explained how carnival humour stressed on the ‘bodily lower stratum’ and was therefore related to “acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy and birth” (Morris 206). Moreover, such ‘degradation’ refers to a coexistence of negation and affirmation as it “digs a bodily grave for a new birth” (Morris 206). As Bakhtin states,
“To degrade is to bury, to sow and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better” (Morris 206). If the previous statements are analysed in terms of such a framework, we would realise that the dialogues of the Flames follow the same pattern as we not only have frank references to copulation and other grotesque physical details but also the juxtaposition of the old woman’s death with the onset of conjugal bliss in the couple’s life which would probably lead to a new birth. Karnad’s dialogues thus offer us paradigmatic carnival humour, though quite unlike Rabelais, which also implicitly mocks the official Brahmanical culture of ascetism, abstention and sexual consummation only for the purpose of reproduction.

The gendered dimensions of these folklores is further emphasised by the appearance of the sari-clad story in a female form. As one of the Flames reports, the old woman of the house had kept to herself a story and a song for such a long time, that they were being choked and therefore they leapt out of her while she was snoring and while the story took the shape of a woman, the song took the shape of a sari which she wore. Not only does this reinforce the nature and origin of the entire genre of ‘women’s tales’, discussed by Ramanujan, they also highlight the play of repressed desires in the shaping and circulation of such tales. Psychoanalytically speaking, the prolonged silence of the woman, regarding the story and song signifies an abject submission to the authority of a powerful superego which disapproves of female garrulity, as evident from the following verse of the Manusmriti:

Let him not marry a maiden (with) reddish (hair), nor one who has a redundant member, nor one who is sickly, nor one either with no hair (on the body) or too much, nor one who is garrulous or has red (eyes) (Buehler, Chapter 3. Emphasis mine).

Considering the fact that the story and song leapt out while the woman was snoring, these utterances may be indicative of those repressed unconscious urges of the id that visit us in our dreams, as they are denied expression in our conscious conversations and actions. In that sense these women’s tales may be seen as fantasies of wish-fulfilments which are obviously born out of the deprivations that they otherwise encounter. Discussing this particular aspect, Ramanujan states, “By means of these stories, women may be partly reconciled to the reality of their lives. Freud quotes Plato as saying ‘Good men dream
what wicked men do’. These are the dreams of good women” (Ramanujan 447). However, expression of such latent desires is also associated with female agency to move beyond the patriarchally prescribed notion of ‘good woman’. Ramanujan himself explains, by citing the tale of ‘The Lampstand Woman’ and the tale of ‘A Flowering Tree’, how speech is an indication of power and that “agency in these women’s tales is connected with their being able to tell their own story and being heard” (Ramanujan 426). In other words, these folktales, allow the silenced gendered subaltern to speak and be heard. It is this fusion of agency and desire of the subaltern woman which is foregrounded through the tale of Rani that the Story narrates.

Rani is seen to be both a victim of patriarchal dominance and someone who also subverts the very basis of patriarchal laws and power-relations. As the play reveals, despite being called Rani, meaning a queen, she suffers a most miserable experience at the hands of her husband, Appanna, who only comes home to bathe and have his lunch and even spends his nights with a concubine. In the meantime, Rani has to spend all her days alone in the house and for a young newly married woman, locked in an unfamiliar house, far away from her parents, with the absent husband being the only known individual, the loneliness and misery is understandably extreme. This stifling isolation is reinforced by the fact that Appanna literally locks her in the house when she leaves, thus giving her no opportunity to even mingle with others or visit someone, to relieve her monotony. Authorial instructions immediately draw our focus, from the very beginning of the inner play, to the ‘locked door’ which is complemented by Appanna’s subsequent actions of actually shutting the door and then locking it from outside, as a stunned and hapless Rani is forced to peer out of the barred window (Three Plays 27). The visual image of a bride peering out of barred windows while the door is locked becomes a paradigmatic representation of women’s confinement within the domestic realm and the attendant patriarchal tyranny. It is important to note how this confinement is secured both through scriptural sanctions as well as the evolution of the nationalist discourse which was based on a strict division between the sphere of the home, allocated to women, and the external world, to be dominated by men. The Manusmriti, for example, explicitly states
5. Women must particularly be guarded against evil inclinations, however trifling (they may appear); for, if they are not guarded, they will bring sorrow on two families.

6. Considering that the highest duty of all castes, even weak husbands (must) strive to guard their wives…

10. No man can completely guard women by force; but they can be guarded by the employment of the (following) expedients:

11. Let the (husband) employ his (wife) in the collection and expenditure of his wealth, in keeping (everything) clean, in (the fulfilment of) religious duties, in the preparation of his food, and in looking after the household utensils.

12. Women, confined in the house under trustworthy and obedient servants, are not (well) guarded; but those who of their own accord keep guard over themselves, are well guarded. (Buehler, Chapter 9)

Such edicts categorically emphasize the need to keep women guarded and how they must be kept busy within the exclusive domain of the domestic sphere. Importantly, such orthodox, patriarchal injunctions have so conditioned women’s lives that they have continued to shape women’s existence across centuries in India especially through such figures as Sita and Savitri which have been held as literary illustrations of scriptural instructions regarding wifely virtue. Even during the nationalist movement, as Partha Chatterjee explained, the reformist tendencies did not seek to dislodge patriarchy but only replaced the old patriarchy with a new patriarchy where women’s role within the domestic realm was reaffirmed and consecrated in accordance with the claims of nationalist discourse. Women themselves, to a large extent, assimilated this logic, as evident from the following claim of the female editor of *Stree Darpan* in 1919:

> Let Sita, Damayanti and Savitri always be venerated by us and may our women of today have the great good fortune of achieving the kind of independence and freedom they enjoyed, even as they brought glory to this ancient motherland (qtd. in Talwar 231).

Even in post-independence India, the figure of Sita continues to function, albeit with limitations, as an ideal which Hindu women must emulate and thereby strengthens the patriarchal discourse which tries to keep women fettered, as much as possible, within the domestic sphere.
This is evident from Rani’s fate as not only is she virtually imprisoned in the house, but Appanna even physically assaults her to exercise his dominance. Quite naturally, Rani is traumatized by the response of her husband and it is this trauma that is transmitted through her fairy-tale like narratives that allegorically document her personal crisis. So she either speaks of being carried away by an eagle to a magic garden beyond seven seas and isles, where her parents are awaiting her return, under an emerald tree, signifying her desire to reunite with her parents, or thinks of the arrival of a stag with golden antlers who is actually a prince, indicating her quest for an ideal husband, which is endowed with greater urgency in the context of her marital misery. In fact, as opposed to the dream of an ideal Prince Charming, Rani is forced to endure as a husband, someone as brutish as Appanna who is rather demonic. Rani therefore speaks of being locked in a castle by a demon, and how, when the castle doors are broken by the flood, a whale comes to take her away. Through such fairy-tale like narratives, with its use of ahistoricised time-frames, magical transformations and personified animals, what is actually foregrounded is the subalternized status of Rani as a subjugated wife and the consequent desire to escape from such misery. The use of such narratives also confirms the rather young age of Rani which again attests to the common Indian custom of marrying off the daughters as early as possible. For many such women the freedom and affections of their childhood operate as a utopian space to which they seek escape from the marital discord experienced elsewhere. This is precisely why Rani seems to fabricate for herself a regressive world of child-like fantasies to alleviate the agonies of her adult existence as a wife. As already explained, it is these agonies and attendant fantasies, which frame the contours of women’s folk-tales in India and thus voice the consciousness of subalternized women, whose actual deprivations shape the dynamics of such tales.

One possible mode of escape from such a miserable situation is offered by Kurudavva, who brings Rani two magical roots which she is supposed to paste and then mix in Appanna’s food to ensure that he becomes enraptured with her. However, the first time she uses one of the roots, Appanna almost faints, and the next attempt produces such a terrifyingly blood-red curry that Rani pours it all into the ant-hill in fear. It is during this process that she is slapped by a furious Appanna who violently asserts his authority over her by reinforcing that law of the threshold which is used to circumscribe women within
the domestic world. While Appanna represents the coercive aspects of the patriarchal discourse, the same effect is also achieved through ideological constructs as the ‘lakshmanrekha’ of Ramayana, a magic circle created by Lakshman for Sita’s protection. The whole notion of a woman retaining her honour and safety while dwelling within the charmed limits set by patriarchy, and then suffering the agony and humiliation of forced abduction the moment she sets foot outside that circle, is used to invest the external world with menaces of violation, of one kind or another, so that the attendant fear keeps women firmly within. As Malati Mathur explains,

The Lakshamana Rekha through which Lakshmana seeks to limit Sita’s movement in the outside world is both a physical and a psychological boundary as it sets out the markers within which a woman may operate. The consequences of crossing the rekha of transgression in a patriarchal world are there for all to see, as Sita is abducted by the demon king Ravana and carried away to his island-kingdom. The rekha so etched out can be seen as a restraining concept that operates in all cultures and civilisations, not restricted to Indian ethos alone. The rekha is the threshold. (qtd. in Mishra 86)

Feminist and sociological research, in fact proves that such ideological constructs, which are passed down to succeeding generations, both provokes domestic violence against women and the sacrificial acceptance of women of such violence as part of their wifely duties. What is at stake here is the patriarchally constructed idea of a chaste and submissive wife, dormantly following male dictates, which has been consecrated through such characters as Sita. The subsequent action of Nagamandala would challenge precisely this construct and perform a hidden polemic against what has come to be known as ‘the Sita syndrome’ (Bhatt 155-73).

This mythic/epic framework is important to keep in mind as even in post-independence India, such constructs have continued to exercise an immense influence on popular psyche, especially, in the wake of the televised version of Ramayana. However, just as Hayavadana enacts a hidden polemic against mythic notions of female chastity, punishments for adultery, the custom of ‘sati-daha’ and so on, Nagamandala too, through the evolving relationship between Rani and the Naga, performs a hidden polemic against the ideal of womanhood which is constructed through the portrayal of Sita, especially the episodes dealing with Rama’s suspicion of her adultery, her trial by fire, her subsequent
exile in the forests and the eventual return to Mother Earth which might be a metaphoric representation of suicide. This inversion becomes evident from the refashioning of the serpent-figure. In folktales that revolve around male protagonists, the serpent is either a competitor or a hostile enemy whom the hero must vanquish in order to either win the beloved or recover some treasure and the tale generally ends with the hero’s triumphant assassination of the serpent (Ramanujan 445). As opposed to that, the serpent in Nagamandala becomes an embodiment of that ideal figure of the husband Rani dreams of and ensures the fulfilment of those repressed desires for conjugal bliss which Appanna neither understood nor sought to fulfil. As opposed to his monosyllabic responses, the Naga smilingly enters into conversations with Rani, tries to assuage her fears, sympathetically listens to her agonies and showers her with heartfelt love. In the process, not only does Rani actually get to experience marital bliss, but she is endowed with that dignity which Appanna never showed during his interactions with her as he simply issued one command after another and expected her to follow in silence, without any response. Instead, Rani’s encounters with the Naga are marked by intimate moments of shared love which finally culminate in consummation and this is communicated to us through Karnad’s beautifully sensuous images which also transform the predatory energy of the serpent into that of conjugal desire and mutual ecstasy:

Rani: I don’t feel afraid anymore, with you beside me. Father says: ‘The cobra simply hooks the bird’s eyes with its own sight. The bird stares – and stares – unable to move its eyes. It doesn’t feel any fear either. It stands fascinated, watching the changing colours of the eyes of the cobra. It just stares, its wings half-opened as though it was sculpted in sunlight.

Naga: Then the snake strikes and swallows the bird.

(He kisses her. They freeze) (Three Plays 44)

In the process, Rani’s days and nights are marked by absolutely contradictory experiences, which she supposes to be simply the different aspects of the same person. Psychoanalytically speaking, the Naga represents the unconscious desire of Rani or any woman in her position, for an ideal conjugal partner who can provide her with that emotional and sexual sustenance which Appanna was entirely indifferent to. Despite Rani’s initial bewilderment regarding the diametrically different attitudes of apparently
the same person, she unquestioningly accepts this uncanny duality and in the process becomes unconsciously involved in an adulterous relationship. In his analysis of the tale of the serpent-lover, on which the play is based, Ramanujan also offers a different explanation of this duality as he states:

The split in the male figure between the sullen husband by day and the passionate lover by night seems also to hint at a common phenomenon in a joint family. When a couple lives in an extended family, the man is usually forbidden to show open affection to his wife during the day, with his mother and other relatives watching; sometimes the mother may frown on or mock the wife for encouraging public demonstrations of amorousness. But at night, in the privacy of the bedroom, or at least in the dark, the husband may change into an amorous and passionate lover. (Ramanujan 445)

While Ramanujan’s statement may indeed be true of women’s experiences in ‘joint families’60, Karnad’s representation of Appanna cannot exactly be reduced to that of a ‘sullen husband’ as he fulfils none of the responsibilities of a husband and his brutish violence cannot simply be passed off as ‘sullenness’. Therefore, instead of analysing the two male figures, as aspects of the same self, it makes more sense to view them as different entities – Appanna representing the violent, inconsiderate face of patriarchal chauvinism and the Naga representing the ideal husband from the perspective of the woman. Interestingly, something similar happens in case of the short story ‘Duvidha’, by Rajasthani author Vijay Dan Detha, where the husband is a ‘bania’ obsessed with mercantile calculations and considerations and is replaced during his absence by a ghost assuming his form, who falls in love with his wife and is passionately devoted to her. The return of the original husband from his business ventures eventually leads to the discovery of the ghost who is thereafter tricked and trapped. Here, the distinction and division between the two male figures is far more explicit and thus serves to foreground more emphatically the suffering of women within marital bonds and the valid consequent desire for love from some other source. Incidentally, in both the tales, the adulterous male lover does confess the whole truth to the woman. This does not happen in Nagamandala where we remain doubtful as to whether Rani’s participation in the relationship is with conscious knowledge of the Naga’s ‘otherness’ or simply because she considers him to

60 The term refers to traditional Indian family units where the married couple lives under the same roof with various members of an extended family as part of a shared residential arrangement.
be none other than Appanna. However, Karnad, as is his wont, does offer us certain ambiguous hints which may indicate that she is consciously engaging in an extra-marital relationship, as opposed to remaining loyal to an uncaring, violent husband. For example, even as Rani looks at the reflection of the Naga in the mirror and sees a cobra, she is not deterred in any way. Later on when she sees the corpse of the dead dog and recollects how the Naga had blood on his cheeks, the previous night, she is only mildly perturbed and remains silent. Moreover, commenting on how Appanna had also brought a mongoose which too had died after a fierce battle, the Story adds:

> When he [Naga] started coming again, his body was covered with wounds which had only partly healed. She applied her ointment to the wounds, tended him. But she never questioned him. It was enough that he had returned. Needless to say, when her husband came during the day, there were no scars on him. (*Three Plays* 49)

Are we really supposed to believe that Rani could not have realised the difference? This seems highly unlikely and as the Story says, “It was enough that he had returned”. In other words what Rani prioritised was the return of the nocturnal figure who showered her with love and satisfied her longings, rather than the confirmation of his identity as her lawful husband. As in case of Padmini, here too we see a woman foregrounding her personal desire by deliberately searching for solace outside marriage.

The situation, however, is pushed towards a crisis as Rani discovers that she is pregnant. While on the one hand she is baffled by the sad blankness with which the Naga receives the news, on the other hand, the discovery of her pregnancy is met with unrestrained fury on the part of Appanna who again unleashes typically chauvinistic violence:

> Appanna: Aren’t you ashamed to admit it, you harlot? I locked you in, and yet you managed to find a lover! Tell me who it is. Who did you go to with your sari off?
> Rani: I swear to you I haven’t done anything wrong!
> Appanna: You haven’t? And yet you have a bloated tummy. Just pumped air into it, did you? And you think I will let you get away with that? You shame me in front of the whole village, you darken my face, you slut – !

(He beats her. The cobra watches this through a window and moves about, frantic, neither notices it)
Appanna: I swear to you I am not my father’s son if I don’t abort that bastard! Smash it into dust! Right now –

(Drags her into the street. Picks up a huge stone to throw on her. The cobra moves forward, hissing loudly, drawing attention to itself. Rani screams) (Three Plays 52)

If we recall the basic elements of hidden polemic we would realise how such a scene, apart from reconfirming Appanna’s bestiality, also implicitly invokes a series of scenes from the Indian epics, such as Sita’s abduction by Ravana and Jatayu’s valiant but failed intervention, or the public humiliation of Draupadi at the hands of Dushyasan after the Kaurav’s victory in the dice game of Mahabharata. Importantly, in all these instances the perpetrators were someone other than the husband, and mostly an arch enemy. The original folk tale, as documented by Ramanujan only refers to the angry screams of the husband and nothing else. It is Karnad who dramatically brings alive the moment of discovery and it is his explicit instructions that create a specific sequence of action where the allusions to the epics and their radical inversion become foregrounded. In all the aforementioned instances it is the husband who immediately or eventually appears as punitive avenger and thus reinforces the patriarchal need to project men as the protectors of vulnerable women. As opposed to such ideological sanctification, Karnad’s play ends up demonising the husband himself and thereby paves the path for further radical problematisation.

The process is accentuated through the event of the chastity test which Rani is forced to undergo and this obviously looks back to the chastity test in Ramayana where Rama’s mere suspicion of Sita’s chastity forces her to undergo a trial by fire. Unfortunately, despite successfully going through such a state, she had to be exiled again, when the residents of Ayodhya doubted her integrity. In fact, she even had to give birth to Lav and Kush in the forests and raised them alone. Here too we see a pregnant Rani is being subjected to a chastity test. However, unlike Sita, Rani indeed had an adulterous relationship with the Naga. Yet, as she pulls the King Cobra out of the ant-hill, in accordance with the Naga’s advice, she states that “I have held by this hand only two...My husband and...And this Cobra” (Three Plays 58). And it is this undeniable truth that saves her as the Cobra, instead of biting her, sways its hood over her head and this is
followed by a miraculous spectacle that entirely baffles Appanna, the Elders and the remaining villagers:

The cobra slides up her shoulder and spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head. The crowd gasps. The cobra sways its hood gently for a while, then becomes docile and moves over her shoulder like a garland. Music fills the skies. The light changes into a soft, luminous glow. Rani stares uncomprehending as the cobra slips back into the ant-hill. There are hosannas and cheers from the crowd. (Three Plays 58-59)

This climactic mise-en-scene thus enacts a mockery of the classic chastity test by emphasising how Rani’s very infidelity serves to prove her identity as a pativrata. In contrast to the consecrated misogyny of Rama in the epic, Rani’s actions lead to an anti-patriarchal miracle of its own, which forces Appanna to abjectly surrender to the newly discovered divinity of Rani. That same male authority which remains inflexibly supreme in Ramayana crumbles into pieces in this counter-discursive women’s tale and again illustrates the emancipatory potentialities of the genre of folk-plays which is distinguished by “the reinscription of gender as a central concern” (Dharwadker 330). Therefore, unlike Sita who was humiliated and abandoned despite her proven purity, Rani wins herself divinity despite her infidelity. Furthermore, unlike Sita, who eventually had to take refuge in Mother Earth, to escape the sorrows of earthly life, which might metaphorically refer to suicide, Rani goes on to lead ‘a happy life’ with a devoted husband, a beautiful son and even a servant as Appanna’s former concubine, who was present at the trial, sought to atone for her sins by serving Rani. Whether the cobra eventually commits suicide by strangling himself with Rani’s hair, or continues to live in her hair, the fact remains that the story operates as a triumphant retort against the patriarchally constituted scriptural narratives and epics where women are granted neither agency nor dignity. Through Rani’s subversive transgressions Karnad’s play foregrounds female desire and agency and thereby enacts an insurgency of subaltern knowledges against the cultural matrix of patriarchal domination.

Thus, both Hayavadana and Nagamandala collectively contribute to the representation of the subalternized condition that women have to face, even in the twenty-first century, in various regions of India. While it may seem as if these plays deal with a ‘chronotope’ that has apparently nothing in common with modern realities of
India, we should realise that these representations serve as stylized dramatisations of certain crucial issues which are as relevant now as they were before. In fact, the dramatic reappropriation of folk-tales, which these plays illustrate, corroborate the findings of Raheja and Gold who argue that

…tradition and resistance are seldom antithetical, that each culture harbours within itself critiques of its most authoritative pronouncements; and . . . while such critiques frequently take the form of such ostensibly ‘traditional’ forms of speech as proverbs, songs, and folktales, they enter at the same time into the realm of the political, as they are deployed in the construction and reconstruction of identities and social worlds in which relations of power are deeply implicated. (Raheja and Gold 193).

Both the plays under discussion, through their central dramatic figures, Padmini and Rani, explore several vital concerns related to women’s existence in India and also voice, in their different ways, a critique of those power relations that continue to subalternize women. At a time when remarkable strides in women’s empowerment coexist with growing urban and rural violence against women and political validation of medieval, authoritarian, patriarchal pronouncements, such as those of the Khap panchayats, plays such as these continue to remain hauntingly relevant. Through these plays, Karnad contributes to the creation of alternate social worlds where women may no longer be identified as subaltern.

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