CHAPTER II

VICTIMIZATION IN CASTE ISSUES

Rivers break their banks
Lakes brim over
And you, one of the human race
Must shed blood
Struggle and strike
for a palmful of water

The specific socio-political process through which modern India came to be constructed has seriously and systematically undermined and continue to undermine those traditions embodying the rational egalitarian as well as the diverse pluralist in the culture and history of the sub-continent. The Pan Indianisation and modernization of the Brahminical and aggressive caste dominance is surely brought about by a collusive colonialism. This has strongly influenced culture and political sphere also and to make the matter worse, they are unspoken premises or taken for granted. This shapes and determines the micro level social practices and relationships. The rise of the communal right in politics, increasing marginalization, and assault on the lower castes and minorities and the ongoing fragmentation of the society as a whole requires to be viewed as logical consequences of the historical forces mentioned above.

Of the colonial period of Indian history during which the sub-continent entered modernity, Professor M.N. Srinivas had two related and significant comments to make: One, on the impact of colonialism on the Indian society, “... it is my hunch, that the varna model became more popular during the British period as a result of a variety of forces”(6); and two, about the way in which caste/varna oppressed groups responded to the situation,
“It was as though they suddenly woke up to the fact that they were no longer inhabiting a prison” (91).

Taken together, these two comments aptly define a multi-dimensional socio-political process that has been set in motion within the now politically unified sub-continental society, a process that has had and continues to have serious and significant consequences, but hardly recognized as such by the intelligent in general and academic in particular. This is clearly brought out by Professor David Washbrook in his “Land and Labour in late Eighteenth Century, South India,” where he argues convincingly that the colonial project rendered “a highly mobile and economically differentiated society” into a “stationary” and “traditional” one; and the specific process through which such a result has been brought about are peasantisation of the economy and Brahminisation of culture. (68).

Thus, colonialism by its acts of commission or omission had unwittingly set in motion the process of incorporation of varna or caste within the modern state. It continues unabated into the Postcolonial period in which develops a fundamental split, a divide between the oppressor and the oppressed. Caste is difficult to get rid of because it has become traditional and has religious sanction. Caste has become an overarching category determining the contour and content of all other socially discriminating category such as gender, ethnicity, language and territory.

This horizontal class and secular polarization along the traditional divide between the Brahminical castes on the one hand and the mass of toiling castes, inclusion of people outside the system of caste on the other, is no longer visible on the surface in the Postcolonial era; it is because the colonial imperialists empowered the upper castes in the course of
its anti-colonial rhetoric. Thereby, they were successful in breaking the emerging mass unity in protesting against the society and economy.

G. Aloysius believes that the Brahmanised castes, the hitherto monopoly beneficiaries of the British rule, at the instant of its change of policy to net in a wider clientele for itself, turned hostile and raised the banner and rhetoric of anti-colonial ‘nationalism’ on the plank of the supposedly unique Indian civilization—a euphemism for the varna model of social synthesis (15).

Taking a closer look at who dominates whom in all societies, two classes of people stand apart. One is the priest and the other is the noble or the rulers. Both these groups together normally form less than five percent of the society’s size. The methodology adopted by these people was plain and simple. While one used unknown power to frighten people, the other used the known power to frighten them. However, it was fright that kept these poor people enslaved and submissive.

“We must fearlessly investigate our past to know where we have erred and how we can rectify our mistakes,” observes G. Aloysius, the editor of the Menace of Hindu Imperialism (32). All the circumstances, historical, cultural, racial, geographical, and economic are in favour of India existing as a strong united nation. No possible combination of external forces can deprive of one’s rights or deny one’s independence or exploit, unless one’s own internal unfitness allows the nation to prey upon her. If at all India has been fettered in the past and is even now enslaved, it must be due to her persistence in her follies than due to the superiority of the conquerors. The spirit of angry revolt is becoming widespread; but it seems to be directed or aimed chiefly against the present
rulers and very little against the social and religious injustices, inequalities, intolerances and exploitations, which are the more dangerous enemies within the country. People are persuaded to forget all the present injustices, oppressions and sufferings in order to preserve the sublime culture of India’s ancestors which has conveniently kept us in ignorance, poverty and servility all these centuries.

The sacred literature, the social organization, the religious institutions and the state have been originated, developed and mainly used and are still being used with the primary object of keeping the masses ignorant, servile and disunited for exploitation by the privileged classes.

Brahmanism is the name used by historians to denote the exploiters and their civilization. It may be defined as a system of socio-religious domination and exploitation of the Hindus based on caste, priest craft and false philosophy—caste representing the scheme of domination, priest craft, the means of exploitation, and false philosophy, a justification of both caste and priest craft. Started and developed by the Brahman priests through many centuries of varying fortunes and compromises with numerous ramifications, it has become the general culture of the Hindus and is, at the present day, almost identical with organized Hinduism.

To understand casteism, it is necessary to trace the causes and course of India’s enslavement, without hurting anyone’s emotions and sentiments, because unpleasant facts cannot be concealed.

More than 4,000 years ago, the Aryans are believed to have come and settled down in the region of the Punjab from their original home in middle Asia. The earliest
Aryan invaders were bold, unscrupulous, superstitions and even cruel adventures. Dominated by the military and predatory spirit, they loved the life of activity, adventure and enjoyment of all good things of the world. Health, wealth, prosperity and power in this world were the chief and almost sole concern of the Aryans, and to them religion was a means of acquiring these. They implicitly believed in their gods and communicated with them in hymns. Their gods were Indra, Varuna, Agni, Vayu and other manifested powers of nature.

The composers of hymns were called rishis. The whole people, including the kings and rishis, were known as the ‘Vis’ or ‘Visas’. It was this word which later on became ‘Vaisyas’. They were no Brahmans or Kshatriyas. The caste system did not exist at all. They were all one community; lived, ate and drank together. The ancient Aryan society was free from abuses and injustices. There was only one vice – they indulged in drinking the liquor or soma. The vice of drink and cruel animal sacrifices increased to so large an extent as to create a split in the community. One section left the country in protest and went to Iran, where they founded the Parsi race and the Parsi religion.

In those days, fighting was almost a daily work. Every house had to provide strong men to take up bows and arrows. The whole community had to co-operate in the protection of the country by self-discipline and a wise division of duties. Our forefathers rose to the occasion and evolved that very intelligent and quite natural institution as the four ashramas – bramacarya, gryhashta, vanaprastha and sannyasa.

The institutions had its origin in the natural and instructive division of a man’s life into four stages. A brahmachari’s (student) duty was to serve the teacher and learn from him the duties of an Aryan, under the direction of the elders. His entry into manhood was
marked by solemn ceremonies when he was married and settled down as a householder or a gryhastha. He had to be diligent in managing the family. He was the producer, the preserver and supplier of all the necessities of peaceful life.

Fighting with enemies, both men and wild animals was as much a function of ordinary life. The old members of the family were physically unfit for that rough work. The bramacharians were also unfit. It would be cruel to separate gryhasthas from their young wives and children. So the men available for fighting were those who had not grow too old, nor were too young, and had sufficient opportunities of enjoying life and might be now reasonably asked to leave the ease and comforts of the family. Such a man was known as Kshatriya. His chief work was to keep the public fire burning in the forest – borders, perform the exercises for preserving his body in a strong and healthy condition.

Passing some years like that in the service of the state, living often in the forests, he soon approached the end of his life. He retired from active life to think of the gods. He might continue to live in the forest itself as a rishi. With all wisdom, experience and austerities, the sannyasin led a simple, quiet and happy life. He freely imparted his wisdom to young men. He was the oldest member of the family, the guru of the rising generation. His advice was found very necessary in the conduct of the common affairs of the tribe. His blessing was essential. He had a right to be taken care of and revered by the whole nation. Kings and leaders of men went to consult him, such a sannyasin was the Brahman, the guide of all.

When men lived by hunting and led more or less a nomadic life, fighting with less powerful tribes who opposed their march, the most natural thing for them was to bring
the spoils of war and game round a fire and enjoy them with the other members of the tribe.

They gathered round the fire. Before the meal was enjoyed, it became a pious duty to offer a portion in the fire in the name of the departed ancestors. The vedic sacrifices must have had their origin there. Such traditional observances became in course of time a part of the religion.

In this way during the Rig vedic time, the small daily sacrifices and the larger special sacrifices had been established as the practical religion of the Aryans. Later, when prosperity increased and peace gave plenty of leisure, kings and rich men took pride in frequently celebrating sacrifices with the aid of priests, and the latter, taking advantage of the vanity of their patrons, developed the simple sacrificial rites into a complex system or rituals. Towards the closing of the ceremony, the priests were endowed with rich gifts. The number of sacrifices was also steadily increased by the priests. In this way, the priest’s vocation became the most lucrative profession of those days. Thus, the priests began to form a separate class and a class of hereditary priests came into existence. In due course, the sacrifices degenerated into social festivals. The priests multiplied and their influence also increased. Kings and rich men encouraged them with their favours and paved the way for their aggrandizement and supremacy. The priests got a permanent place in society and thus exploitation began. The sacrificial ground became the legislative chamber from where the priests issued their sacrificial dicta and social laws and as M.M. Kumte states, “In the priest rests the whole sacrifice and the sacrificer in the sacrifice” (204).
Therefore, it is clear that the motive of the priests in forming an exclusive caste was not any consideration of a religious or spiritual nature but one of sheer greed for wealth, women and wine. Some of the passages from Manu Smriti may prove this:

A Brahman is born to fulfill dharma. Whatever exists in the world is the property of the Brahman. On account of the excellence of this origin, he is entitled to all. The Brahman eats but his own food, wears but his own clothes. All mortals subsist through the benevolence of the Brahman. (Manu, VII, 35)

Let the king after rising early in the morning worship Brahmans who are well-versed in the three fold sacred sciences and learned in policy and accept their advice. (Laws of Manu, VII, 37)

Brahmans should not be taxed and should be maintained by the state. (VII:133)

And according to Manu, the Brahman was allowed to marry four wives, a Kshatriya three wives, a Vaishya two wives and a Sudra one wife only.

M.M. Kumte, in his Aitreya Brahmana states that, “The Brahmans are ready to take gifts, thirsty after drinking soma, hungry of eating food and ready to roam about everywhere according to their pleasure. They formed a fraternity” (201). Thus, the priests formed a secret society perfecting plans to enslave the people in the coils of ritualism and superstition, practising deceptions and leading a life of indulgence in defiance of all morality. The person presiding at the sacrifice was usually called the Brahman and the priests established themselves as a hereditary community of Brahman. That was the
beginning of the caste system. The suppression of the masses by prohibiting them from all knowledge and status, is the dominant characteristic of all the caste rules at that time and thereafter. The theory of caste seemed to work wonderfully with the superstitious people of the south. The caste scheme was a very effective instrument of domination and exploitation for making the people submissive and divided.

Manu Smriti is the final shaping of the Brahman-imposed social order, which demands the perpetual subordination of all other communities to the Brahmins. Preventing inter-marriage was the most important thing and that is why they introduced child-marriage and prohibition of widow marriage. The girls were given away in marriage even before they were old enough to protest. Widows might violate caste restrictions if they were allowed to remarry. So the most meritorious thing that a widow could do was to burn herself with the dead husband. But historians agree that widow marriage was permitted and sati was unknown in ancient days. This is very implicitly stated in Rig Veda: “Rise up, woman, thou art lying with one whose life is gone; come to the world of the living, away from thy husband, and become the wife of him who holds thy hand and will be willing to marry thee” (65). In religious matters and learning, women were degraded to the position of the Sudras.

Modern India has seen many of her famous sons fighting against the caste system, upper-caste dominance, untouchability, and trying to improve the lot of the lower strata of our caste ridden society. Among them, may chiefly be mentioned the names Gandhi, Ambedkar, Lohia and Phule.
M.K. Gandhiji was sincerely dedicated to the eradication of untouchability and made sincere effort towards the end. But, at the same time, he was a devout Hindu and aimed at reform within the framework of Hindu religion without seriously disturbing the existing social order. He also supported the fourfold varna division. Gandhiji, as is well known, was a moderate and did not believe in taking extreme, direct or violent action to achieve his end. He believed mainly in non-violent means of propaganda. This was true in the case of his fight against caste evils too. Gandhiji was of the view that an oppressed Harijan labourer must leave from the services of his employer instead of revolting against him. Gandhiji did not propagate any structural change in society nor did he make any frontal attack on caste.

B.R. Ambedkar, known as the Father of Indian Constitution, started his work in the then Bombay Province as the spokesperson of the Mahar sub-caste and devoted his whole life to fight against untouchability throughout the country. His fight against the caste evils was, however, confined within constitutional limits. As Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee he attained a major success when the constitution of free India proclaimed an end to all formal inequality among Indian citizens, abolished untouchability and made provisions for special privileges for the depressed classes of society. However, it yielded little results. He himself adopted Buddhism and led a mass conversion in Nagpur in October, 1956.

Rammanohar Lohia’s view on reforming caste system was different from that of Gandhiji and Ambedkar. He respected them both and was very much influenced by Gandhiji’s non-violent concept. But Lohia was in favour of militant struggle by the
untouchables against their oppressors. However, he suggested that this struggle should be made in alliance with enlightened members of the upper class.

Jyotiba Phule was another champion of the depressed classes and closely associated with the anti-caste movement in Maharashtra. Though he did not fight for the upliftment of any particular caste, he was a true friend of the downtrodden and weaker sections of the society. He fought against the upper caste dominance. He commanded equality for all religious minorities. He insisted on education for the lowest. He aimed at striking at the very root of the social order to usher in the desired reforms. In order to attain his ends, he established the Satyashodhak Samaj. This Samaj, among other revolutionary activities, also encouraged the Harijan castes to perform different religious rites themselves without the aid of priests. Despite the efforts taken by various socialists, caste is simply a crystallized social institution which is filling the atmosphere of India with stink. Caste prejudices are still going strong. Unless people change their attitude towards individuals and society, no saviour can redeem India from its menace.

Caste prejudices have not only robbed its people of their rational thinking and judgement but also served as a great impending factor in the modernization and all round development. The most serious human rights violations in India are due to the inter-caste violence linked to criminal elements. Such incidents speak volumes on the meaninglessness of political freedom without change of heart. Social writers are expected to effect social change. In their hands, literature is propagandist and meant to stir society’s conscience against the terrible hurts and pain they depict. India can depend on literature to awaken social conscience and the voluntary forsaking of undesirable attitudes and
practices in society, because of writers like Arundhati Roy, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Davidar, who work solely with a purpose towards a social cause.

The marginalized characters like Velutha, Kalo and other characters display a personality that is especially endowed with heightened sensibilities – sensitivity to their surroundings to the social milieu, to other human beings, so that one feels their pain, speaks their heart aches and becomes a voice of the voiceless.

Literature and society complement each other the way the human heart and mind do. The superiority of one upon the other cannot be established in a hurry. Literature records dreams and desires, fears and furies, fact and fiction in its minutest details to soothe and soften mankind in hours of agony and anguish. It also creates the background of numberless games, which decide the fate of individuals and of society which keeps germinating in the minds of man for years. The saga of man’s emergence from the savage to the civilized stage is nothing but the result of the transforming power of literature. The portrayal of a variety of characters shows not only the hue and cry of individual against system but also the whispering notes which the individuals feel but fail to hum against the noises of the maddening crowd or but goes unheard, just as Gayatri Spivak believes that though the subaltern speak they are often not heard.

Buddha has stated, that according to his Dharma, if every person followed a) the path of Purity; b) the path of Righteousness; and c) the path of Virtue, then it would be the end of all suffering. So, a small attitudinal change would definitely change India towards betterment and that could be a real progress. This is an attempt to demolish the establishment with the very tools that are forged to serve the ruling classes. Wherever
and whenever exploitation or segregation in the name of caste is smelt, a voice has to be raised louder against it. The caste system that has subjugated more than one fifth of the population to levels worse that animals for more than two millennia and which represent institutionalization of the most heinous inequality by the Hindu religion as ordained by its gods, must become the prime target of every Indian’s life. Such an attitude would definitely work not only towards the emancipation of all the untouchables but also towards annihilation of the entire caste system. It is basically against the systemic exploitation that runs unabated for centuries.

No social or religious law can be established or long enforced without the sanction of the state, and it took many centuries of conflicts, machinations and persecutions before ‘caste’ was finally recognized as the birthright and badge of servility of the Hindus. Thus, Brahminism monopolized religion and learning and it converted religion into a means of heartless exploitation.

The proposition that caste is solely an internal matter for India is untenable. The U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navaneeth Pillay has said that globally, caste discrimination affects 260 million people; about 170 million of them are there in India 2004 (The Hindu, Sunday Magazine, April 18, 2010. p. 4). In contrast to India, Nepal, until 2007 a Hindu state by constitution, regards caste discrimination as indistinguishable from racial discrimination, and has confirmed that it will work through the U.N. to counter caste discrimination; the European Union has made a similar commitment. Anyhow, casteism is a blot on humanity.

Having discussed the origin and development of the caste system, it is also not difficult to understand its various branches like, women subordination, child exploitation
and so on. Even during the 21st millennium, life has become increasingly difficult for the lower castes or the exploited ones. Although the caste system is likely to crumble on its own under the impact of full industrialization, the ‘dark age’ of untouchability in India today threatens to prohibit that industrialization from even taking place.

The last decade of the 20th century and the early years of the new century saw momentous developments in India signaling intensification of political struggles involving class, caste and gender. Everyday there are reports on caste tensions, dowry deaths, female infanticide, agrarian violence, workers protests and tribal uprisings. There are movements, groups who take up these issues and the government has its own responses to them. A recent report in *The Hindu* dated 23.06.2011 states:

The Dalit (Arunthathiyar) panchayat president, P. Krishnaveni of Thalaiyuthu panchayat in Tirunelveli, who was brutally attacked by a gang recently, had repeatedly filed complaints with the police officials and district administration citing caste-based discrimination but the administration failed to act, says a fact-finding report.

A fact-finding team, comprising members of Confederation of Federations of Elected Presidents of Panchayat Government, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry, Tamil Nadu Federation of Women Presidents of Panchayat Government and Dalit Panchayat Presidents Federation of Tamil Nadu, visited the village twice and spoke to the villagers, members of gram sabha and a few officials.
The report, which was released here on Tuesday, says that Ms. Krishnaveni had been facing discrimination right from the day of her announcement to contest elections. She was not allowed to sit in the chair that was allotted for the elected president. Since May, 2007, she had filed 12 complaints with the police and district administration about the discrimination and on her right to function independently but no action was taken.

The fact-finding team has found that Ms. Krishnaveni had to seek the help of the District Collector to execute her duties, as the vice-president had been thwarting all attempts made by her to work independently.

There were reports that the vice-president and his supporters usually disrupted the proceedings of gram sabha meeting and she had to seek police protection to conduct meetings.

Irrespective of caste affiliation, she had functioned in an unbiased way, stated the villagers. She had taken many decisions in a bold manner which had invited the wrath of a few sections of the dominant castes.

The team also came to know that Dalit presidents belonging to 125 panchayats in the district were subject to one form of discrimination or the other.

**Recommendations**

The State Government should ensure legal and administrative safeguards and guarantees enshrined in the constitution. State and district administration
should intervene immediately and provide non-discriminatory and atrocity-free political environment for the chiefs to function independently and effectively. The report concluded that panchayat presidents belonging to Dalit communities and women in particular were still being discriminated against.

Such is the state of affairs in the social and political setup in India. There are men and women of literature who have brought out the ugly face of caste-oriented Postcolonial India in many of their works. They view this problem not merely as a social critic but as victims of the social evils. One such writer is David Davidar. David Davidar’s *The House of Blue Mangoes* has been chosen to bring out the conflict and caste violence in different contexts as they occur in a society; violence at home, in the political field and in the socio-cultural arena.

*The House of Blue Mangoes* is a sweeping epic and an ambitious tome which chronicles three generations of the Dorai Clan. The story focuses on the Dorai men and the inescapable conflicts between father and son that tragically play out each generation from Solomon to Daniel to Kannan.

The novel is extensively concerned with caste conflict, and its spread to the three main castes in the story is to add fuel to the caste controversies that have raged for centuries. The first of the book’s three sections is concerned with rising inter caste tension in a time of drought. The dominant characters are the local head man, Solomon Dorai and his wife Charity. Solomon fails to prevent the resurgence of strife and local inter-caste war results in which he is killed. In the second part, Solomon’s son Daniel
takes centre stage against the background of rising unease among the British in 1907, caused by the impending 50\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the so called Indian Mutiny. Daniel is the doctor specializing in ‘Siddha’ medicine, together with the preparation of a popular as well as miraculous and skin-whitening cream. He attempts to establish an original kind of community, with members of his family given plots of land on preferential terms. The third plot develops the story into the 1940s and the run-up to independence. The British carry on with their social rounds despite everything and even manage to take the lead in a none too savory hunt for a wounded man-eating tiger.

Before discussing caste violence in Davidar’s novel, it is necessary to understand that violence is worldwide; conflict and violence are the central facts of society. Every society has its conflicts; every society has persons who face up to them. Many conflicts have led societies to reconstruction as well as deconstruction. However, it is highly impossible to uproot violence from any society. As Ralph Dahrendorf observes, “neither a philosopher-King nor a modern dictator can abolish it once for all . . . conflict can be temporarily suppressed, regulated, channeled and controlled . . .” (159).

It is universally accepted that violence is destructive but at the same time oppressed people cannot be liberated with violent revolution. In the medieval Arabic World, Ibn Khaldum developed a conflict theory of society based on the assumption that the struggles between the nomad and the tiller were fundamental to the evolution of civilization.

According to Mosca, one of the theoreticians of conflict sociology,

In all societies—from societies that are meagerly developed and have barely attained the dawning of civilization down to the most advanced and powerful
societies–two classes of people appear – a class that rules and a class that is ruled. The first class, always the less numerous, performs all political functions, monopolizes power and enjoys the advantages that power brings, whereas the second, the more numerous class, is directed and controlled by the first, in a manner that is now more or less legal, now more or less arbitrary and violent, and supplies the first, in appearance at least, with material means of subsistence and with instrumentalists that are essential to the vitality of the political organism. (232)

It is the monopoly on the use of force that sustains the ruling class in power and hence it can be overthrown only by the force of a revolution. With this in mind, caste violence in Davidar’s novel The House of Blue Mangoes can be examined.

The novel surveys a swathe history localized in the regions of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Andavar and Vedhar are the two dominant castes of Chevathar. The people who inhabit Chevathar are Tamil speaking. There are a couple of Brahmin families attached to the two Hindu temples, the rest belong to the lower castes. Andavars and some others had converted to Christianity, but strictly observe caste hierarchy. Even in the Church, they sit apart. The dominant family are the Dorais, headed by the patriarch Solomon Dorai, the thalaivar of the village, “the biggest landowner, who resides in a big house.”

Lower castes retain their memories of their humiliation at the hands of upper-caste Namboodri Brahmins and Nairs. Their women were expected to leave their breasts bare for the higher-ups to gape at. When some turned Christian and their women began to cover their breasts, their blouses were ripped off them. To quote from the text,
At the urging of the missionaries, Andavar and Nadar women began to cover their breasts. This, unsurprisingly, threw the upper castes, especially the men, into a frenzy of insecurity and frustration . . . Finally, unable to bear the torment, the middle-ranking castes went too far. ‘We have a divine right to gaze upon your filthy breasts and you should be flattered that we do so. They are ours to enjoy,’ declared a landlord . . . as he wrenched the blouse off a pretty Andavar woman. (17)

Thus, violence was witnessed by Chevathar, “Caste had permeated every aspect of their lives” (25).

The village thalaivar Solomon was very much satisfied when he looked at the village paths which were formed according to the ‘caste rules’:

For example, the path from the Paraiyan’s quarter, the Cheri, began at the southern most point of the village and ran in a great arc around it, before ending at the bridge. In practical terms, it simply meant that an inhabitant of the cheri would have to walk nearly twice the distance that a Brahmin would, in order to cross the village . . . The highest castes got the best, and the inhabitants of the Cheri at the lowest point downstream . . . got the worst. . . . like any other village in the area (Chevalthar) was rigidly ordered by caste structures and traditions (25).

Following the breast war, Andavar women were disrobed by the men of the Vedhar community, in Kilanadu: “Retribution was swift. A band of Andavar toughs went on the rampage, looting and burning houses in the Vedhar quarter . . . Where the situation was still extremely volatile” (18).
The Dalits i.e., the broken people of India, are in a historical struggle for the last hundred and fifty years, to build a new identity within the nation’s existence. The challenge to them is to create a new social order which will put an end to their centuries old political and economic marginalization and heal their religious wounds as untouchables with a new spiritual wholeness. Davidar picturesquely portraits the dehumanizing treatment meted out by a marginalized community. A ‘low caste’ man was not even permitted to use the road laid by the government. A Dalit in the Chevathar village had to conform to its rules and regulations specially ‘made’ for them. “A Paraiyan had been beaten almost to death by some Vedhar men for daring to stroll through their quarter, blithely smoking a beedi, with his turban firmly on his head rather than around his waist as was customary in the presence of the higher castes” (23). If at all a Parayan should use the government road, he should walk in such a way that “their shadows could not fall on the upper castes, . . . they should not approach villagers of the highest caste closer than thirty-two paces and their lungies should always be folded above the knee” (24).

Davidar’s novel starts from 1899 and closes in 1947. So it would be simplistic to believe that untouchability was practised in those days. It is sixty years since Mulk Raj Anand wrote Untouchables and sixty years since India got independence. But things have not changed any better and the social deformity has survived all the social reforms and revolutions. To cite examples, here are headlines in The Indian Express, 19.10.’09: P. 7.

Intolerance In Virudhunagar

Home Out of Bounds To 37 Dalit Families (7).
The members of 37 Dalit families who fled T. Veppankulam in Virudhunagar district on October 4, fearing violent reprisals from the dominant caste Hindus of their village took refuge in Kariapatti. The day before the Dalits left their homes, casteist tensions had run high at T. Veppankulam, when some Dalits waiting in queue with their families to get photographed for the Kalaignar Maruthuva Kaapeetu Thittam (State Government’s Medical Insurance Scheme) objected to some caste Hindus jumping the queue. The verbal exchange led to violence when five Dalit men, including

V. Muniyandi, a daily wage labourer, were badly beaten. “As usual, they made casteist remarks against us and began to thrash us,” Muniyandi told Express.

The terror did not stop there. Fearing that the Dalits would file an FIR against them, the caste Hindus surrounded their houses and refused to let them out. Those who had got into state transport buses were also forcibly made to step down. Sources said Mukkalam sub-inspector, who came to the village to enquire about the incident had to bear the brunt of upper caste fury. He was transferred the same night, the sources added. A Dalit man was again beaten up by a 40 member group with slippers and sticks. On October 4, some 37 Dalit families moved out of their native place to a nearby place where they could enjoy some protection. As is the practice, the police filed the first FIR against the Dalits and then filed one against the caste Hindus. In this context, one can recall the words of Frantz Fanon: “individuals and peoples can become whole again by participating in violent politics. According to him violence is a cleansing force” (73).

In Davidar’s novel, after the Breast War, Chevathar enjoyed peace for some time. But it was only for a short duration, because the pressure between Andavars and Vedhars tried to find an escape. To exploit such situations, a handful of people would be
there in every village. Likewise, Vakeel Perumal was waiting to instigate a caste tension, because he wanted to gain popularity by promoting himself to a significant position in the village and “The only thing that mattered to him was his own welfare...” (47). Initially his plans did not materialize but “he wasn’t the sort of person to dwell on his defeats for too long, and he had already started planning other schemes” (47). Finally, on the great Chitra Pournami day, the newly Christian convert Vakeel Perumal was happy to hear the angry voices twisting in the air. People in the procession were shocked to see that the road was blocked at all the three sides, barring the passage of anyone who wanted to use the road. Religious tension was high and the two religious sections dashed around the pandal. Everyone could see Vakeel Perumal’s hand in the dispute and he was ordered by the thalaivar to quit the village. But the religious tension was followed by a caste war. The two leaders sent ultimatums to each other, asking each other to leave the village giving a dead line.

Davidar’s debut novel, *The House of Blue Mangoes*, covers a huge canvas taking in many generations and great many social changes and upheavals. The novelist’s great care and caution reaches its apotheosis when he says: “I invented three new castes because I did not wish to add fuel to the caste controversies that have raged for centuries now, to the general determent of the country and the states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala which are my particular interest...” (418).

Though the novel is larger in its canvas, it has a unifying vision. The moral centre of the novel is in its vision of family – a vision that is dear to Indian way of thinking. The novel celebrates the age-old ideal of home, family and community. The novel locates this ideal in a caste ridden, superstitions, primitive, drought-prone Indian village called Chevathar.
A typical Indian village, Chevathar comes to life in all its colours, flavours and details. The village headman (Thalaivar), Gnanaprakasam Solomon Dorai Andavar, desperately tries to avoid caste wars whatever the extremity of the provocation. His own position as thalaivar and the existence of the members of his low-caste is challenged and it finally boils down to a fight for survival. The upper-caste Muthu Vedhar insults him in public during the Chitra Pournami procession by spitting on him and giving vent to his old hostilities and jealousies. Solomon quietly absorbs this public insult and refuses to retaliate. Yet, Muthu Vedhar lunges upon him for a physical assault and it is only now that Solomon acts, manoeuvering to get an upper hand and by telling him:

You big black buffalo, for all these years I have tolerated you and other jackals that work for you because I have tried to keep the peace. You have insulted me before the village and for that you will pay. I will give you and all those who owe you allegiance a month to leave. If you haven’t gone by then I will personally make sure that you’ll wish you had never emerged from your prostitute mother’s womb. (68)

Once Solomon hurls the challenge at his adversary, Muthu Vedhar, in the heat of the moment, the latter not only turns belligerent but snarls back: “I said I would reduce you to dust and I will reduce you to dust. I am not leaving this village, it’s you and your stinking family who will leave or be destroyed” (68). Thus,

It is now a question of personal honour and dignity for both and however much Solomon wished to reverse the course of events in the interest of peace in the village he is powerless to do so. Now, for both the sides survival of family and community can only be at the cost of the other.
Attempts to mediate peace by the revered priest, Father Ashworth, or by the district collector have no effect in reversing the situation. In all this it must be observed that it was Solomon who had shown utmost forbearance and that he was reasonable all through. The novel’s narrative shows in no uncertain terms that it was the contankerous and cunning people like Vakeel Perumal who fan out conflagration from the smouldering embers. Solomon Dorai, the village headman, is helplessly caught in the conflagration in spite of his deepest concern for peace. But it must be noted that caste rivalries are responsible in an important way in disturbing the peace of the community especially in a situation where a low-caste village headman is at the helm while the upper-caste landowner is handed in the role of the ruled. The English priest, Father Ashworth, has always been intrigued by the corrosive effect caste has on the affairs of the community when he (Ashworth) had arrived in India twenty-five years ago. He had been appalled above all else by the institution of caste. He tried to understand the viewpoint of those who argued that caste was necessary to give the country’s vast and diverse population a sense of identity and belonging, but surely that did not excuse the injustice and barbarity perpetrated in its name! How could any sane and compassionate human being abide the discrimination sanctioned by caste religion upon his fellows, based entirely on self-serving interpolations in the great religious texts? (30)

Much of the hatred and hostility between the upper-caste Vedhars and low-caste Andavars in Chevather could be traced to the generations of old caste prejudices. The book refers
to “Breast Wars” of 1859 that devastated people belonging to both the castes by visiting upon them arson, looting, stripping of women and other such outrages. It is in this context that solomon’s efforts to maintain peace of the community and at the same time preserve his clan could be termed brave and even heroic, notwithstanding his failure in achieving them. Solomon, thus, fights against the mighty forces of caste, superstition and prejudice.

If caste functions from outside as the disruptive force for family and community in the first generation, it is domestic intrigue within the family that is shown to be the divisive factor for the second generation. It is interesting to note that Daniel who wanted to banish the caste factor from his ideal community, ends up opposing his son marrying outside the caste until the end. The novel has many overtones of Indian caste system. For instance, the novel talks about molten lead being poured in the ears of any low-caste person who heard the Gayatri Mantra. The “breast wars” are described in detail:

…..hitherto tradition had ordained that the various members of the caste tree should bare their breasts as a sigh of deference and subservience to those who perched higher in the branches. Accordingly, the untouchable went bare breasted before the Pallans, the Pallans before the Nairs, and so on until the Namboodri Brahmins, who deferred only to their deities (17).

Lower castes could not keep their turban on their heads, but had to tie it round their waist when passing through a locality inhabited by higher castes.

Muthu Vedhar sent “emissaries . . . to the various caste groups who supported him in the neighbouring villages – the Marudhars, Pallans, Thevars – to come and join
him. He promised them “land and loot” (97). Fierce caste war erupts with Vehdars on one side and Andavars were on the other side seeking to destroy as many as they could, “Some died immediately, their skulls cloven in two or frantically battered in” (105). Muthu Vedhar died and Solomon Dorai was greatly injured. As G. Aloysius posits that

No other country in the world can claim such a proud though tragic record of national life which has through at least five thousand years, stood consistently and fought unflinchingly, undaunted by failures, for the same noble ideals of human brotherhood, a religion of righteousness and service devoid of unmeaning priest craft, and the spirit of the widest tolerance between differing peoples and religions... Her (India’s) vitality was wasted in the protracted internal struggle” (209).

Davidar emphasises that even Christianity, which often boasts of itself for its humanistic approach towards every social issue, could not abolish the deeprooted caste system in India. In fact, it appears as if it has almost encouraged the system to get even stronger for its own convenience. Davidar exposes the inhuman treatment meted out to the newly converted Dalit Christians:

. . . , the headman proposed that a hollow wall be constructed from the door way of the Church to the altar rail . . . Separate communion tables and chalices would ensure that Andavar and Parayan didn’t drink from the same cup or eat the same bread. Neither group had set eyes on the other in all the years that they had worshipped together, for the lower castes left Church immediately after the service through a door set into their side of the building. (26)
The converted Dalits still do not escape oppression because the real oppressors are still at large. The tyranny of the landlords and their efforts to deny Dalits any opportunity to progress upward must be taken into consideration in any historical assessment. Caste distinctions and discriminations are still allowed in the congregations. The novel clearly shows how the sitting in the Churches was to be mapped out according to caste varieties.

Caste is so powerful that it penetrates into a religion which does not accept this infamous system. Caste was not introduced by Christianity, but intruded and infiltrated into it from Hinduism. The poor and the oppressed are always ready for conversion in order to escape from the hands of the oppressors. Conversion has been widely accepted as the simple power path to social change. B.R. Ambedkar supported this path to social equality of the depressed classes. He wrote,

Obviously, social equality is easily achieved by conversion. If this is true, then why should you not adopt this sample path of conversion. . . . It will be seen that this path of conversion is the only right path of freedom which ultimately leads to equality. It is neither cowardice nor escapism but a revolutionary act. (13-14)

The Church discipline made it easy for those depressed classes who were dissatisfied with their stigmatized behaviours and customs so that they could catch up with the refined Brahmins and the upper-castes. To the converts, baptism is not merely religious event but also a search for equality. In several places converts were denied access to drinking water by the caste Hindus. The ‘untouchables’, thus, face a dilemma. They enter the Church in search of equality. But the upper castes already in control of the Churches
would not grant it to them. The caste Christians continue to agitate against granting them equality and most churches are forced to allot separate seats to them at the back of the building. The dispute further tightens the rigidity of caste customs.

The converts view their baptism as a step in their liberation from caste oppression. To them it is a new identity. As studies have shown, subjectively it has remained a strong factor. Their self-image has changed considerably. This is the main reason why very few of them have abandoned Christianity though the state that calls itself secular continues to deny them scheduled caste privileges only on a religious basis. While many external practices have changed, the basic attitudes remain unchanged and are being further intensified because of the caste-based political processes in the state.

Thus, Davidar in his novel presents us a pathetic picture of unnecessary caste divided people of the same village. Casteism is a wreckage caused by Indians themselves. It is a wreckage of India’s own crime and folly. Realizing that India is sinking deeper and deeper into helplessness, Indians are entrenching themselves in a mad fury behind those ancient sins which have besmeared India’s past with failure and shame. It is a curse still because it continues to hit at many even in an age of information technology. Recently, as the news item in The Hindu says, a 40 year old Dalit was allegedly beaten up and his eyes were gouged over a minor dispute in the Vardwaha village, according to the police. As an Indian Historian, R.C. Majmudur comments saying:

The caste system was, thus, creeping like a shadow on the fair face of India, and the shadow was gradually lengthened with the declining day. It was a speck of black cloud that cast its shade on the brilliant culture and civilization of the Aryans. The cloud was yet no bigger than a man’s
hand, but it was destined ere long to assume threatening proportions and envelop the atmosphere in an impenetrable gloom ushering in the dark night long before it was due. (193)

When the British united India in the nineteenth century, they did not take away the essential Indianness. It is this essential Indianness that Davidar examines early in his work, suggesting that the tired and senseless caste conflict must extinguish itself before Indians can begin to emancipate themselves from the limitations imposed on themselves by both internal and external forces. It is the duty of the religious leaders, social reformers and great thinkers to find ways to abolish the cursed caste system in India. The existence of caste in India is due to the notion of inequality imposed by religion, which gives rise to social and cultural practices and prejudices. If these social and cultural practices cease, caste could be annihilated. This is a simple formulation of the quite complex issue of caste.

A similar problem arises in Rohinton Mistry’s account of the lives of Ishvar and Omprakash Darzi in A Fine Balance. The novel begins with the encounter between two Dalit villagers Ishvar and Om Prakash and Maneck Kohlah in a train. Maneck’s textbook hits Ishvar on the spine, and Mistry tells immediately “The thought of his heavy text books thumping that frail spine made him shudder. He remembered the sparrow he had killed with a stone, years ago; it had made him sick” (3). Innocuous as this sentence may seem it has already accomplished one major task. It has established sympathy between these characters but it is sympathy directed at Ishvar by Maneck. Once more if one looks at who becomes the subject and who the object of this discourse, one begins to note a subtle semantic pattern emerging. Om Prakash and Ishvar are described at length in terms of their physical appearances and their jocular treatment of each other. Maneck
is described through a direct rendering of his inner thoughts. So he offers them half a
glass of watermelon-sherbet (the other half of which he has already drunk). He also tries
to do it in a way that will not harm their self respect:

    He drank half and said, ‘I’m full. You want it?’

    They shook their heads.

    ‘It will go to waste.’

    ‘Okay, yaar, in that case,’ said Om Prakash, and took the sherbet. He
gulped some, then passed it to his uncle. (7)

Ishvar drained the glass and returned it to the vendor. “That was so tasty, he said, beaming
with pleasure. It was very kind of you to share it with us, we really enjoyed it, thank you.
His nephew gave him a disapproving look to tone it down. How much gratitude for a
little sherbet, thought Maneck, how starved they seemed for ordinary kindness” (7-8).

    The problem with such a representation is that it fails to recognize that there
would be an ambiguity even in the subservience that the two tailors demonstrate in their
attitude to Maneck. It is not that such an incident could not really occur in contemporary
India. It is just that there seems to be something insidious in Mistry’s selection of incidents
to define the relationship of Maneck with Ishvar and Om. Again it places Maneck in a
position of benevolent patronage vis-a-vis the two which is disturbing. Their physical
ugliness is offset by his handsomeness. The contrast is made through the eyes of Dina,
“How silly of me, she thought, mistaking this lovely boy for a bowlegged tailor. And so
sturdy too” (10).
The Chamaars turned tailors are dealt within the section entitled ‘In a village by the River’. The section begins with a litany of caste atrocities visited upon the lower castes by the Brahmans and landowners. The physical” distance between the Chamaar settlement and the upper-caste houses is a clear indication of the segregation that marks their lives. The catalogue of atrocities serves a dual purpose. On the one hand, it helps to socialize the Chamaar into the role expected of him in society. On the other, it becomes like a magic chant that keeps the embers of anger alive. This can be most clearly seen in the narrative account of Dukhi’s memory of the caste tyranny:

Thus, Dukhi listened every evening to his father relate the unembellished facts about events in the village. During his childhood years, he mastered a full catalogue of the real and imaginary crimes a low-caste could commit, and the corresponding punishments were engraved upon his memory. By the time he entered his teens, he had acquired all the knowledge he would need to perceive that invisible line of caste he could never cross, to survive in the village like his ancestors with humiliation and forbearance as his constant companions. (97)

Dukhi’s internalisation of the codes that are meant to govern Chamaar behaviour makes him live out the prime of his life “in obedient compliance with the traditions of the caste system” (95). At the same time there is a striking disjunction between the obsequious attitude that the Chamaars are forced to display to the members of the upper caste and their real contempt for them. This comes out most clearly in their choice of a highly sexualized vocabulary with reference to the Thakurs and the Brahmans. The account of how Ishvar’s face was disfigured or how the Thakur victimized Dukhi serves to locate
the fact of caste oppression in the individual life of a Chamaar. The Gandhian discourse of the abolition of untouchability is reduced to mere platitudes in the face of the well entrenched nature of the caste system. The account of the speech of the Gandhian workers is immediately followed by another long passage that describes the fate of those untouchables who broke any of the rules that govern their existence:

For walking on the upper-caste side of the street, Sita was stoned, though not to death—the stones had ceased at first blood. Gambhir was less fortunate; he had molten lead poured into his ears because he ventured within hearing range of the temple while prayers were in progress. Dayaram, reneging on an agreement to plough a landlord’s field, had been forced to eat the landlord’s excrement in the village square. Dhiraj tried to negotiate in advance with Pandit Ghanshyam the wages for chopping wood, instead of settling for the few sticks he could expect at the end of the day; the Pandit got upset, accused Dhiraj of poisoning his cows, and had him hanged.

(108-109)

Ishvar and Narayan, Dukhi’s two sons, also internalize the norms that govern the Chamaar existence. They know exactly what their caste permits or prohibits. The demarcations of the borders between the castes are strongly etched in their consciousness. And yet this does not prevent them from frequenting the village school and attempting to overhear the lessons taught by the schoolmaster. For this great sin they are thrashed by the master. Dukhi brings this grievance to Pandit Lalluram—the Chit Pavan Brahmin. Inevitably, he is denied justice. What is of significance is the ironical tone with which Mistry describes the meeting between Dukhi and Pandit Lalluram. The belching Brahmin is a familiar stereotype
used for comic and denigrative effect. Lalluram is described in these terms: “He pivoted on one buttock and broke wind. Dukhi leaned back to allow it free passage, wondering what penalty might adhere to the offence of interfering with the waft of brahminical flatus” (113). The point is that the choice of the lexical items and the complex nature of the syntactic construction cannot really recreate our sense of the authentic Chamaar existence.

To attempt to capture the voice of the Chamaars is different from letting them speak for themselves. Mistry adopts a critical stance towards a casteist Indian society, to which he is already an outsider, by virtue of being a Parsi and an immigrant. This is not to argue that caste does not constitute an important political and social reality in India and that it needs to be questioned. But when non-Dalit writers speak of Dalit characters there is a tendency to look at them from a position of inherent superiority. There is a strong element of condescension even in the kindness. That Mistry is not a Dalit would be apparent from the lack of a political intent in the novel that he writes. His basic thesis is that everything ends badly and he proves it through Manek’s suicide, the reduction of Ishvar and Om to the status of beggars. Any Chamaar who threatens the rigid codes of the caste stratified society is punished by narrative retribution. Thus, Narayan asserts his right to vote on his own behalf. In return burning coals are held to his genitals and he dies a gruesome death. His parents, wife and two children are burnt together with his corpse so that future challengers of the caste hierarchy can learn a lesson. The narrative comments: “What the ages had put together, Dukhi had dared to break asunder; he turned cobblers into tailors, distorting society’s timeless balance” (147).

Mistry seems to be reinforcing the same logic through his narrative technique. It is condemnation of rural India rather than concern for the Chamaars that dominates the
narrative. The caste system becomes just one more focus of attack. The attack is not based on experiential truth but on a fictive creation of a homogenous society where all upper castes are oppressors and all lower castes are oppressed. They are all stock characters; and there is a startling lack of ambiguity in this portrayal and an inaccurate representation of intra-caste relations.

Ishvar and Om’s escape from the village is an escape from casteism. Their move to Mumbai city grants them a further anonymity. New problems manifest themselves and poverty becomes a dominant motif. The characters seem to lack any kind of internal conflict with their past or with themselves. The brutal experiences of their past, the litany of crimes committed upon their fellow caste-brothers seems to fade totally into oblivion.

A reading of Dalit literature informs us that anger is the dominant emotion of the lower castes in answer to the experiences of caste tyranny. The narrative underplays this anger. Om does plot revenge but is soon convinced by both Ishvar and Ashraf that “The murderers will be punished, Inshallah, in this world or the next” (149). Religion provides an antidote for pain but is paradoxical is that it is religious sanction in the first place that creates the pain. It is the shastras that lay down the ‘caste’ of a man—and, therefore, condemn the lower caste to lives of degradation and humiliation.

Another antidote to the pain created by inherited memories of caste oppression is amnesia. And this condition seems to affect Ishvar and Om as soon as they reach the city. Ishvar and Om cease to be lower caste individuals as if caste were a matter of choice or that it was non-existent in an urban context. Only when they return to their native village do they remember what caste can mean. Om bridges the temporal gap provided by their physical dislocation by spitting paan juice at the Thakur. For a while it
seems as if Om will vindicate wrongs visited upon his ancestors. But Mistry’s narrative has other plans. Ashraf, Ishvar and Om are forcibly taken to the sterilization camp. Ishvar and Om are sterilized. Still there seems to be hope, for they learn that the sterilization is reversible. Then Thakur Dharamsi appears. Orders are given and Om is castrated.

The castration of Om is really symbolic of the importance of the lower castes combating caste warfare. Where caste colludes with class in determining the power of individuals in society, it is small wonder that Thakur Dharamsi has the ability to order Om’s castration through a government doctor. After all, he “is the big man in the Congress Party, they say he will become a minister in the next elections if the government ever decides to have elections” (520). The methods have become more subtle. The objectives are the same. Those who transgress caste barriers should be severely punished so as to provide an example for everybody else. It is significant that Dukhi’s “family name will die without children” (535) because it was Dukhi who triggered the entire sequence of events by turning his sons into tailors.

The last chapter before the epilogue is entitled, ‘The Circle Is Completed’. It takes the narrative forward another ten years to the New Delhi of the Sikh riots. Again Maneck plays the role of a benevolent but decidedly superior Parsi citizen of a hopelessly savage India. Just as the opening of the novel had cast Maneck in a humanitarian light, the close echoes this association. It is almost as if Maneck Kohlah is Mistry’s alter ego and his sense of outrage and frustration are part of Mistry’s own. It is an individual sense of angst and alienation in a world robbed of meaning. And the only solution is the choice of individual extinction: suicide. The novel ends with Maneck hurling himself on to the silver tracks as the express train comes speeding by. And with Ishvar and Om clowning
to themselves in Dina’s presence, making her laugh. Maneck Kohlah is the first character one meets at the start of the novel. And the last sentence of the novel deals with Dina: “Then she dried her hands and decided to take a nap before starting the evening meal” (614).

It is as if Dina and Maneck provide the frame on which the entire narrative is structured. Both are Parsi, individualistic and educated. Both are alienated from their immediate environments. It is really through their eyes that one could sense the pathos and the tragedy of the events that beset Ishvar and Om. Both Dina and Maneck have an authorial empathy that the other characters lack. The novel is finally the story of these two proud, individualistic characters who play such an important role in the lives of those less fortunate. If there is a solution to the problem of Om and Ishvar, for Mistry it lies in the individual transformation of people like Dina and Maneck.

What Mistry fails to recognize is that political initiative is increasingly being seized by the lower castes in order to act on their own behalf. Maharashtra has a history of an active Dalit movement ever since the birth of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. The period in which Mistry sets his novel was also the period of the Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra. Why is it that Mistry chooses to ignore this movement? The Dalit Panthers modelled themselves on the Black Panthers of America. Both rejected alternate appellations Nigger, Negro, Harijan. Both have parallel literary movements and both consist of oppressed classes trying to break discriminatory patterns. On August 15, 1973 the Dalit Panthers led a march, shouting slogans against “Black Independence Day”. The novel is set in the mid 1970s and would have been written at a time when memories of the Panthers and Shiv Sena gang rioting had not faded away. Mistry chooses to silence these voices of
dissent within his text in order to articulate other voices that define and limit the Chamaars as passive objects and as victims rather than as agents of action.

Among Indian writers writing in different languages, who responded to the colonial experience and also captured the changing patterns and social tensions of that era, Bhabani Bhattacharya makes a major contribution, the reverberations of which are felt throughout India and abroad. The first decade of the twentieth century saw the birth of four great novelists of Indo-anglian fiction, viz. Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan and Bhabani Bhattacharya. All of them grew up in British India, observed the social, economic, cultural and political conditions prevailing under the colonial rule, and imbibed firsthand experience of the national movement either through their perceptive artistic imagination or through active participation in it. As novelists they have fictionalized the national movement with Gandhi or Gandhism at the centre, spread over different periods of Indian history. Thus, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand have fictionalized the movement during the nineteen twenties while R.K. Narayan has depicted its impact in the pre-independence era upto the death of Mahatma Gandhi i.e. 30th January, 1948. Bhattacharya, on the other hand, has dealt with the impact of Gandhism during the Post-Independence era of the sixties. In *So Many Hungers!* and *He Who Rides a Tiger*, the current of the nationalist movement flows along with other currents.

As the dictum goes, “Office shows the man,” it can also be said, events make a person a writer or a creative writer. So is the case with Bhabani Bhattacharya. The offshoot of the famine in Bengal forced him to become a fiction writer. Bhabani’s *He Who Rides a Tiger* was written in 1954 when India was making a sincere attempt at creating a new social order. The novel is an attack on both those who profited by people’s misery
during the famine and those who exploited them as caste tyrants. The protest against caste system lashed out in his novel with lacerating vehemence gains a new dimension because the main symbol of this is himself “becoming” a brahmin. The arrogance of higher caste people is markedly portrayed. A strong sense of social purpose is evident behind Bhabani’s works. The novel *He Who Rides a Tiger* is a telling story of a colossal hoax perpetrated by a low born black-smith on the class-conscious and caste-conscious people of a small town in Bengal.

The protagonist of the novel is Kalo. He belongs to the ‘Kamar’ community. Kamar, also known as Karmakars, an occupational caste associated with manufacturing iron implements at the cottage level. From very ancient times iron implements were made by the village Kamar who constituted a district occupational group within the Sudra caste of Hindu society. The smell of iron smelting in manually regulated foundry, the harsh sound of iron hitting on anvil sand, and the flares and sparks of the red iron on an anvil are characteristic features of a Kamar. Even now there are Kamars in villages and towns. Their continued existence has a direct connection with the continuation of traditional Agriculture, Irrigation and Housing patterns. Almost all the implements required for traditional agriculture and housing are made by village Kamars. The origin of blacksmiths dates back to the beginning of settled agriculture in Bengal. It is a popular belief that the first Kamar was the son of a woman of the Sudra caste and his father was the celestial artificer Viswakarma.

In the novel, Kalo is a poor blacksmith who has a beautiful daughter, Chandralekha. The upper caste people often wonder why a low born should own such a beautiful name, Chandralekha. They have colonized even the language. It is an unwritten law that such
beautiful and fashionable names belong only to the upper caste. A poor boy or a poor low born girl are not worthy to be known by such names. So Dalits are not even deprived of lands and social dignity but also the very name, which stands for anyone’s identity. To be born in poverty is a curse and, of course, it can be changed through performance.

Both at the state level and in the popular imagination, caste discrimination when coupled with poverty, becomes a major public issue in West Bengal. Status and stigma are not the only exclusionary principles at work in West Bengal. Other caste neutral modes of exclusion have been developed to keep the lower castes at bay.

Bengal Renaissance made Bengal famous in a number of ways. One of them is the broadness of mind against religious practices. But they did not forget the castes and its ground realities in social life. The Renaissance got its movement to work in the upper strata of society. The outlook about the Sudras and anti-Sudras did not notice a basic change. Rajaram Mohan Roy, the great reformist, clearly identified a corrupt tree planted in the midst of the country and he had no doubt in his mind that if it existed no good fruit should be expected. It is known to all that untouchability is not at all acceptable in the modern concept of democracy. However, it continues to prevail even after 30 years of communist rules in West Bengal. It is prevalent throughout India even after 60 years of independence. The following newspaper report reported recently can be of a good example:

Kodikulam, a village located under the foothills of Yanamalai (elephant hill) near here, is a gifted place. It boasts of an age old public well that provides tasty water round the year. People from far and wide throng the place with cans and drums to fetch the water home. But the Dalits of the village cannot dare even to go near the well.
‘The SCs (Scheduled Castes) cannot go beyond this point,’ says a 61-year old farmer, A Akkniveeranan, pointing to a distance of about 150 metres away from the well. The (Dalits) can ask any of us to fetch the water for them and we will oblige. But they cannot do it on their own. This practice has been there for ages and it cannot be changed, he adds with no shilly-shallying.

The caste Hindus of the village, occupied predominantly by people belonging to Kallar and Moopar community, do not hesitate to talk about the discrimination of Dalits even to journalists. The well has been associated with four small temples built close to it and religious sentiments were given as a reason to keep the Dalits away from it.

They (Dalits) will not be spared. Honeybees will sting them if they try to go near the well, says Packiam, an aged widow. Concurring with her, 26-year-old P. Suresh, a construction labourer, says: The youngsters of our village will be in these temples all round the clock. Some of us even sleep here in the nights to prevent anyone from defiling this holy place.

Once when I hade gone there, some children asked me if I could give them some water to drink. I asked them why they don’t take it themselves. They said they were not supposed to go there. Then, I understood and felt very sad for the poor children. This atrocity is being practised there for ages and no body is able to raise their voice for the fear of earning the wrath of the dominant caste,” he says seeking anonymity. *(The Hindu, Friday, July 1, 2011)*
Bhattacharya, a Bengali Brahmin, takes up the contradictions and tragedies of life among such occupational caste groups. The Bengal famine of 1943 becomes the background for his *He Who Rides a Tiger*. In the story, Jharna is gripped by the devastating Bengal famine. Everywhere there is poverty and unemployment. Kalo, having no work, leaves the town in search of a job. He has to leave his daughter under the care of her old aunt. Since he is left with no money, he travels ticketless on the footboard of a train. When he is hungry, he steals some bananas and is caught and sentenced to jail for three months by a magistrate.

In the prison, he shares his cell with Bikash Mukherji. He is in jail for protesting against a policeman beating up and killing a poverty stricken individual standing and staring at the food in an eating place. Bikash Mukherji is given the number B-10 in the jail and is addressed so by everyone. So Kalo and B-10 become thick friends because they share the same ideals. They think of ways and means of retaliating against society. Biten suggests to Kalo many ways of protesting and hitting back.

On being released from jail, Kalo begins to look out for a job. He lands up carrying the corpses of destitute into municipal trucks. Soon this becomes a competitive job and Kalo decides to approach one Rajani Bose for a job. He works as a procurer for a group of brothels in the city. He sends money to his daughter not knowing the real state she is in. He suddenly hears Chandralekha shouting and crying from one of the rooms where he has been working as a procurer.

The rich customer leaves the room in anger and Kalo is horrified to see his loving daughter Chandralekha. He takes her home without the knowledge of the brothel keeper. He is happy and relieved when he understands that she remains a virgin.
Kalo decides to fake a miracle to get a temple raised and fool the people by making them worship a bogus image. He wears a sacred thread like a Brahmin and sits in a position of fervent prayer. Chandralekha sits next to him. He tells the crowd that he had a dream that an image of Lord Shiva would emerge from the ground, and the people are wonderstruck to see the dream come true. The people collect money and a temple is built on the spot. He takes a new name Mangal Adhikari. He employes a priest as he is not conversant with the rituals. Motichand, Sir Abalabandhu and others constitute a board to look after the day-to-day working of the temple. This magistrate who had sentenced Kalo for imprisonment is among many others who visit the temple and touch Kalo’s feet for blessings. Kalo, along with his daughter, receives B-10 when he is released from jail. Since B-10 has his own plans for his future, he does not join him in the activities of the temple.

The title of the novel is derived from the saying “He who rides a tiger cannot dismount.” It is Kalo who is now riding the tiger and it is very difficult for him to get off its back. When the father and the daughter start, ‘riding the tiger’ it is Chandralekha who shows greater discomfort and less inclination for the adventure. However, towards the end Kalo is able to kill the tiger of deceit.

In *He Who Rides a Tiger*, the novelist not only records the misery of the poor, but also the cruelty of the rich. The irony of the situation is skillfully developed and very aptly presents the ghastly contrast between affluence and poverty, power and helplessness, goodness and hypocrisy.

Kalo tries to make the people believe that God is not a Brahmin by caste, and that the Kamars as much deserve to go to heaven as people of any other caste. Hunger
eliminates caste and it does not differentiate one man from another. Class and caste have no place in the presence of hunger. Critic K.K. Sharma states: “Bhabani Bhattacharya mounts in the novel a strong attack against the distinctions of caste, class and creed and vehemently pleads for their synthesis’(17).

Lekha and Bikash fall in love with each other. Kalo would allow the marriage if only Bikash is a Brahmin. When asked about his caste he says that he belongs to the convict caste to which, in fact, Kalo also belongs Lekha works in the temple with all devotion. The congregation, out of respect for her, addresses her as Mother of Seven-fold Bliss. Motichand, who is the trustee of the temple, thinks of making Lekha his fourth wife. Lekha agrees to marry him after the installation as the Mother of Seven-fold Bliss. Suddenly Kalo realizes that while playing a game against the society, he is destroying the life of his daughter. On the day of the ceremony, he discloses his true identity to the people. The destitutes cry out in joy for their brother. Some of the people want to beat him because he has cheated them. Kalo learns that Bikash is Bikash Mukherji, who is a Brahmin. Kalo had always wished that Chandralekha should marry a Brahmin. Bikash declares that Kalo is a great exponent of social freedom and congratulates him.

It must be mentioned here that Kalo has had his revenge against the society that had been exploiting the poor and the needy. But the fact remains that he is not happy for having put on the mask because along with the exploiters of society, he has also attracted the poor, beggars, cripples and destitutes. All of them show their faith in him and sacrifice all that they can for the bogus god made by him.
In conclusion it must be said that Chandralekha has been Kalo’s true liberator. She opens his eyes so that he should know the truth. Thereafter, he discloses his true identity to the crowd.

Though the novel records the fearful consequences of the Bengal Famine of 1943, it also focuses on the caste-ridden social order in the early forties. The father and the daughter, Kalo and Chandralekha suffer a lot owing to the caste system. The worst evil, the caste system, has been crushing the Indian society for ages. Kalo is shocked to find that owing to her low caste, Chandralekha is not properly recognized and applauded for the medal she wins as a meritorious student. He remarks:

There was the time when she won the medal and not a breath of recognition had come to her from Jharna town because of her humble place. Imagine if the magistrate’s daughter had won the medal how the town would have rejoiced and feted her! It had been Jharna’s sneaking shame, not glory, that the medal was won of them by a Kamar’s daughter.... The girls at school were cold and aloof because of her humble caste. She was at the top in every test and that made it worse. Lekha would have preferred to be at the bottom of the class if that would have made her schoolmates more friendly. It wouldn’t be, she knew. She would then be scorned all the more.

And the people of her own stations were frankly critical.

A Kamar girl puts on the feathers of learning! A sparrow preens as a parrot! Old Brindhavan had cried to a gathering of caste elders, shaking his gray head in disapproval. His audience had echoed the alarm. (11-12)
The novel demonstrates that a man’s caste is too much with him. Though Kalo is not satisfied with the people of his class and maintains his distance, yet even so his heart was truly with his own people whose life he shared. He is deeply attached to the roots of his soil. He sympathizes with the poor dying miserably under the impact of the ravenous hunger created by the rich for their benefits. Kalo reflects:

‘What would happen to the departing souls of those dying on the streets?’

Kalo asked himself. Were they doomed to haunt the earth forever as specters? Or doomed to haunt the hells? For them there was no chanting of the Name, no scattering of rice, the rice that would feed their earth form.

No Brahmin priest spoke the timeless words from the Veda or applied the holy fire to the fleshless faces on the funeral pyres. Would the hundred thousand dead hover in unseen shapes over the great city eternally? Was heaven meant for the rich alone? (52)

Kalo’s hatred for the caste system is intensified by B-10’s account of the tragic life of his sister, Purnima. Her parents turn hostile to her when she wishes to marry a young man of a different caste whom she loved. Biten fails to understand why parents make their child’s life miserable simply because of their belief in the caste system, evil too strong for man to remove.

Biten observes: “What evil power was it that, in a minute, turned loving parents into brutes? How could the force of belief be so blind and devastating? For, they who could have given all they had to make their daughter happy condemned her to a living death. How was such perversion possible?” (167).
This tragedy makes Biten hate and defy all social customs and Brahminism. Although B-10 does not take upon himself the direct charge of challenging the society, he creates an opportunity for Kalo. It is he who suggests: “We are the scum of the earth. They hit us where it hurts badly in the belly. We have got to hit back” (55). He is Kalo’s friend, philosopher and guide.

Kalo is not at all depressed and broken-hearted; rather, he is replete with vigour and freshness. The low caste blacksmith upsets the old social order by investing himself with Brahminhood and rising to the top. When Kalo finds the precious moment of great triumph and joy, Biten in a low, impassioned murmur, ejaculates “...you have triumphed over those others—and over yourself. What you have done just now will steel the spirit of hundreds and thousands of us. Your story will be a legend of freedom, a legend to inspire and awaken” (244).

Kalo’s, daughter Chandralekha, is full of fresh confidence in her capability to fight her own battle successfully. Lekha’s position is suffocating. She finds herself in a gilded cage and wants to enjoy her freedom. She has sufficient reasons to revolt against the prevalent mode of behaviour perpetrated by the society. She had been through the same hell of starvation and suffering. In a way, she has suffered more than her father at the hands of society, because she was forced into a brothel. Both father and daughter fight against fear and against the society which is corrupt and wicked. And they succeed in compensating their past defeats. Towards the end of the novel she is able to see only life before her: “In spite of it Lekha would not accept defeat. She steeled herself in her decision. Life stood before neither her ... nor death. There was a new strength in her, a new awareness, with which to face the challenge of an unknown future” (244).
Thus, the humble village blacksmith Kalo takes his revenge on the caste ridden society and makes a living for himself and his daughter by faking a miracle that begins as a fraud and ends as a legend passing himself off as a Brahmin priest. The story ends with a triumph for the soul over the flesh. Eventually, when the fraud is detected, other low caste people hail him as their brother and the outraged upholders of caste and custom panic.

One of the factors of caste segregation can be termed as poverty. The economic disparity leads to many social evils like women victimization, juvenile crimes, child trafficking, and superstitions, to name a few. What Kalo wants to change is not his caste, because towards the end one could find out that he is comfortable only as Kalo and not as a Brahmin priest. Kalo wants to change the attitude of the society towards him, and towards the lower castes. No one has ever been given a preference to choose one’s birth. All are equal and everyone must believe it. Only this attitude will drive away the cursed demon of caste from Indian society.

There is no country in the world without caste. But even that can be utilized to build a stable society. The laws and institutions must remain undiminished in their power through scores of centuries. Indians may plan to make everybody Brahmana, if Brahmana is the ideal of humanity. Throughout the history of India, attempts have always been made to raise the lower classes. Many have been raised and many have yet to be raised and the process will continue till everyone becomes Brahmana. Police and Military are not necessary to govern a country if everyone is willing to acquire and propagate wisdom and the power of love.
Kalo decided to become a Poojari because he found no way “to hit back” at society, because it hurt him and his daughter very badly. It is a sort of revenge upon society: “Yes, yes, there was way, a way not simply to make a living but a way to settle accounts with them,” (77) says Kalo. He wanted to deliver himself from his/enemies. He wants to be lifted up above those that rise up against him violently. He wants to cast away his caste which had been “the heavy yoke of his past”(82). Reason and justice transformed him to be the god’s own priest: “He was scum no longer. He was going to be a pillar of society! A pillar created by two seers of gram. Han, that was the way to avenge ... so had the wheel of Karma turned” (86-87) and “It was not a question of living. It was a question of revenge”(97). Kalo’s fight was not with an individual but with life that made such individuals possible. However, Kalo made very Brahmin bow down infront of him; powerful enough to induce clash of interests among the great ones and able to bring out mutual jealousies and hatreds.

Kalo’s anger is the righteous anger and outrage over caste violence. Kalo could not have forgotten what he and his daughter had been through. When Lekha won the medal, she was simply overlooked by her classmates, school and by the towns people just because it was won by a Kamar’s daughter; a magistrate who knew nothing of the meaning of hunger sent him to prison as a common thief, while Lekha was forced to steal a pumpkin vine from a earth hut of a Chamar, to ease her hunger; Lekha was lured away from her house to a harlot’s house; when the whole of Bengal was affected by famine, a few men wearing tunic of smooth white silk where diamond buttons gleamed were hungry for sex. So wherever there is poverty, there is surely exploitation. When the poor cried for food till their voices croacked; when they fought with each other for food like enraged
animals, a few preferred procured girls with grace and freshness, never mind if they be low born or untouchables:

Two great hungers had struck the land of Bengal in the wake of war; the hunger of the masses of people uprooted from their old earth and turned into beggars, and the hungers of the all-owning few for pleasure and more pleasure, a raging fever of the times. Uprooted women with their own kind of hunger had to soothe the other hunger, had to cool the raging pleasure fever with their bodies. (53)

Kalo’s fervour for revenge attains its peak, when he finds the end of human decency; the rottenness. One question remained unanswered to Kalo and to many and that is “Poverty kills the fair land of Bengal. Where does all this money come from?” (53).

Dr. Ram Sewak Singh rightly remarks:

The same man, in two different situations is different. Since the society has tricked Kalo into a thief, a convict and an immoral trafficker, he has foisted a big fraud on it and thus proved how hollow our religion and its upholders are. The indignation of the novelist is all the more poignant because Kalo was forcibly dragged into the broil. (67)

Kalo’s act of vengeance gave him wealth and familiarity but that too temporarily. ‘Mangal Adhikari’ could bring smiles on his Chandrakanta. For a few years, he made all the upper-caste men and women bow down at his feet. He could deceive them only to his satisfaction. But that did not help in any way in altering the social structure. Kalo was selfish in this way. His sufferings made him neither a revolt nor a social reformer. His
tricks played upon the rich and upper castes were not productive. He could have or
should have protested violently with heroic resistance. Kalo’s struggle is not against man
but against the operating social forces which make man savage and wicked. The novelist
allegorically establishes Kalo’s victory over the caste-ridden society: “They had come
back in time to hear him, to see him drive his steel deep into the tiger. The scum of the
earth had hit back, hit -back where it hurt” (231). Chandralekha firmly believes that
struggle is the only means for existence and righteous life.

R.K. Narayan’s magnum opus The Guide bears a beffitting comparison with He
Who Rides a Tiger. Both the novels deal with a man who deceives the society and
becomes a Yogi, a spiritual man. But there is an apparent difference in both the novels
regarding their climax of the plot. While in He Who Rides a Tiger the central character
who wears a mask throws it away and comes to his previous position, in The Guide it
becomes difficult for the hero to tear off the mask because here the mask becomes man–
the reality. Kalo deliberately and purposefully designs himself of mould into Mangal Adhikari
so that he can score with the society while Raju begins his career in an idiosyncratic
manner and the circumstances make him a Yogi, the real guide. Raju never does anything
on his own; rather, he acts as a puppet at the hands of developing circumstances. He too
fits well in the self spurt channel and enjoys what comes on the way. Raju does not have
a sharp social commitment as it is obvious in case of Kalo. Raju does not fight for social
cause and uplift. At one point, like Kalo who comes to realize that he has acquired
genuine Brahminic powers, Raju too has convinced himself of his own exalted statues.
Finally, Raju loses the feeling of an actor performing an act, here the act becomes the
reality, the mask turns into man and Raju, the guide metamorphoses into a guru. But
Kalo at the end of the novel, after relishing revenge, succumbs to truth and returns to his pavilion. Here, the metamorphosis of the personality does not happen. *The Guide* and *He Who Rides a Tiger* both deal with men whose holiness is only a convenient disguise, but in both these novels the men undergo such transformation that the fraud ceases to be a fraud. Narayan and Bhattacharya deal with this apparently similar theme in totally different ways.

Bhattacharya’s *He Who Rides a Tiger* provides the most comprehensive and objective outlook on the problem of Indian- culture and caste system. The novel comes out in the period in which the downtrodden had emerged as a potent political force and Gandhi was trying to win them over. In fact, Bhattacharya being an objective delineator of Indian social reality has discussed extensively the most vital aspects of Indian life in all its social, political, economic and cultural manifestations.

The Dalit emancipation movement developed among the Dalit intelligentsia. It struggled for a separate communal identity and political representation in the colonial set up and contested such reformist views as patronizing. It launched social awareness (Samajik Chetna) events aimed at an autonomous communal consciousness. One such event was the public burning of the Manusmrti by Ambedkar (1891-1956) in 1927, a conservative Hindu code dating from the first century in which rigid practices of untouchability are codified. By such an act of defiance to the Brahminical orthodoxy, Dalits not only contested the justification of caste discrimination, but also publicity expressed a moral judgment that found Hinduism lacking in morality. In this way, they profoundly upset the upper caste monopoly on knowledge, religion and morality. Access to ‘religious’ knowledge
had been traditionally denied to Dalits by the Brahminical tradition, only to be dispensed in a charitable manner by the reformists once Dalits had been suitably ‘purified’.

Caste conflicts often highlight the enormous difference between the notion of a democratic society and the actual suppression of poor and marginalized Dalits. The poor and the marginalized have to hit back and shun ‘compromise’ and ‘politics’. To understand this, revisiting certain historical events that Maharashtrian Buddhist Dalits (and Ambedkarite Dalits in other parts of India as well) consider to be important land marks in their social ‘awakening’ (Jagran). These events have already been well described historically (Zelliott, 1992), but they deserve to be looked at again.

In the Brahminical view, Dalits have been defined as lacking culture, knowledge and morality. Since the late nineteenth century, such conceptions were published by those very Hindu reformist organizations whose struggle against untouchability promoted Dalits social, religious and political integration within a reformed ‘Hindu community’ in the making. The Arya Samraj, founded in 1875 thus invented rituals of ‘purification’ (Shuddhi), a symbolic act supposed to render them more acceptable to orthodox caste Hindus. In the 1930’s, Gandhi’s charitable organization, the Harijan Sevak Sangh, defined social work towards Dalits as a prerogative of upper caste citizens. It excluded Dalits themselves from its memberships and encouraged ‘respectable Hindu citizens’ to show their repentance and benevolence through moralistic propaganda and hygienist programmes in the slums.

So, being outraged like Kalo is not enough to break a wall which has a very strong and profound foundation. The oppressed must have an urge to display their rightful and daring ability to shock the conservative sections of society, thus, radically replacing
the condition of victimhood by a threatening image of Dalits as revolutionaries. Such repertoire of outrage was used strategically to gain publicity:

Raja Dhale published a vitriolic critique of the incident and policies of independent India towards the Dalits in the August 1972, issue of Sadhana, a Marathi monthly. He characterized the 25th anniversary of Indian independence as a black day. His criticism of Indian independence brought swift reaction from the Jan Sangh and the Shiv Sena; they led marches to the office of Sadhana and threatened to burn down the magazine as well as the offending article. Those parties also urged the Indian Government to punish Dhale for his lack of respect to the national flag. Throughout 1972 and 1973, the Marathi press gave interviews of Dhale and other future Panther leaders such as Namdeo Dhasal. Thus, by 1973 members of this young, somewhat militant, stream within the Dalit movement had gained a measure of publicity for themselves and for their ideas and had also succeeded to some extent in establishing a political identity separate and distinct from the RPI (Republican Party of India). (Gokhale 267-268)

The renaming of the Aurangabad University after Ambedkar was achieved only by struggle. The decision to rename the University was perceived as an official boost to Dalits among upper caste students in the Aurangabad region, who expressed their fury and struck back at Dalit villages. Apart from the material reasons that motivated such staunch opposition, such a renaming meant the outrageous intention of a ‘defiling’ Dalit symbol into the private
space of the upper castes, since people usually hang their university diplomas on the walls of their residences (Murugkar).

No one would have forgotten the 2006 Khairlanji massacre. On 29th September 2006, four members of a family were brutally gang raped and murdered publicly between 5.00 pm to 7.00 pm by dominant caste people. Khairlanji is a small village. One of the isolated Buddhist families had moved in 1986 from another village after inheriting 7 acres of land. Facing harassment and discrimination in the village, the Bhotmanges, the isolated family, decided to move out and build their house illegally at the outskirts of a spare communal land. They lived with constant harassment at the hands of the dominant Kunbi Caste. The farmers, whose land neighboured their own alleged that they needed a road to access their fields. In 1996, the Panchayat (village council) requested the use of 2 acres of land their for this purpose. The municipality also claimed 2 more acres under the pretext of carrying on new development works. Then they began to oppose the municipality. The two Bhotmange sons, one of them partially blind and the other a college graduate, assisted their parents economically by doing agricultural labour job; the daughter, who was the most promising in her studies (the year preceding the murder, she came first in the whole Bhandara district’s 12th class final exam and was awarded a prize) and who nurtured higher professional ambitions, had plans to join a training centre of army officers. One of their relatives, Siddharth Ghajbuje was a policeman and he assisted the family in all legal matters. One day Siddharth was attacked by a mob of high caste villagers. It was complained and they were arrested. The dominant caste took this as a daring act of defiance. The arrested persons were released on bail, which was an irresponsible act that was only made possible due to the technical ‘omission’ of not registering the case
under the SC-ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. The released persons went to the Bhotmane’s hut, where they captured the four members of the family (the mother Surekha, 44, the daughter Priyanka, 18, and the two sons Roshan 21 and Sudhir 23). They were dragged to the main village square, savagely beaten. The women were paraded naked and finally gang raped and killed. The two boys were sexually mutilated after refusing to rape their mother and sister and died on the spot brutalized and humiliated further by the crowd.

The next day, police officers refused to lodge a complaint on the brutal murderers, obviously for no reason. The Ambedkarite activists of Bhandara district learned about the murder through the local press. They managed to buy the pictures of the dead bodies from the local photographer when the bodies were recovered from the canal. These images played a major part in the protests and became the main incentive for producing collective anger. NGOs and even government employees gave their supportive hand in the matter. Once given a public character, the atrocity called for a public reaction. This was not considered as a Dalit issue but a human rights issue. After this hue and cry, in September 2008, the fast track court accused 38 and found 8 persons guilty, among whom 2 were sentenced to life imprisonment and 6 to death by hanging.

The result is clearly the outcome of the pressure put on the authorities by the post-Khairlanji protests that stormed the state for several weeks and started mounting once again at the end of the trial, causing apprehension among the authorities. For the marginalized who lack access to power and resources, struggle is their only way to be heard, because humanistic values and democratic ideals are routinely trashed in the everyday lives of Dalits and other marginal groups in contemporary India. Thus, a better solution
would be for Kalo to have chosen the other way of ‘action’, so that Kalo could have carved a niche for himself in the history of India. The drama of Kalo’s heroic effort to discard his own low caste of a Kamar and successfully mount and dismount the tiger of Brahminism is enacted against the backdrop of famine and national movement. The presence of this backdrop and that of Sir Abalabandhu in the novel telescopes this novel to *So Many Hungers!*, thereby coalescing the theme of untouchability and national freedom. Kalo’s individual effort to demolish the caste barriers, it will be seen further, is an objectification of one of the strategies of the national movement itself. In *Kanthapura*, for example, the struggle for liberating the human mind from the prejudices of caste becomes a prelude to the national struggle for freedom. Similarly, Bakha’s dream of emancipation from untouchability gets coalesced with the dream of national freedom through Gandhi in *Untouchable*. In *Kanthapura* and *Untouchable*, caste barriers break down when the people of different castes move towards the national movement as they do in *He Who Rides a Tiger* wherein Kalo dismounts the tiger of Brahminism and joins Bikash Mukherji (Biten), Viswanath and others for whom protest against hunger has become a protest against British rule itself and its lackeys.

It is pertinent to note that in *Kanthapura, Untouchable* and *He Who Rides a Tiger*, the protagonists of casteism are either the agents of the British rulers, or they stand in the way of the people’s unity by preaching and practising casteism thereby helping the rulers indirectly; Mahant Nandgir in Anand’s *The Village*, Swami and Bhatta in Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* and Sir Abalabandhu and Motichand in *He Who Rides a Tiger* are such characters. These protagonists of casteism promote their self-interest by siding with the British rulers on the one hand and by exploiting the gullible people on the other.
Kalo also finds himself on the side of such people for some time but soon he gets out of this, thereby debunking caste and casteism itself.

The novel presents the killing of the tiger as the killing of an ant. The conclusion simplifies the problematic issues involved in the text. Because of the pull and pressure of the social behaviour, Kalo has not only named his daughter differently but nourished her in a good educational environment unknown to his caste. On a number of the occasions he shows his annoyance for not getting appreciation for the beauty and brains of his daughter due to belonging to his own deprived and destitute community. So, in order to fulfil his submerged and suppressed desire he goes on riding the tiger in the disguise of Mangal Adhikari.

Bhattacharya not only evokes our pity for the poor and the downtrodden but also comes out into the open to champion their cause by making them protest against the evils of exploitation and casteism. Kalo is also presented as a champion of social freedom. He wants to fight not with an individual but with the entire upper class society which thrives on exploitation. He resolves to work hard for the social emancipation of the lowly and to take revenge on the wealthy.

Another novel that invites comparison with Bhattacharya’s *He Who Rides a Tiger* is S. Menon Marath’s *The Wound of Spring* (1960) which is a story of a Nair family of Malabar in Southern India. Both novels are attacks on the caste system in general and on the moral hypocrisy and social inconsistency with which it is enforced in particular. Like Bhattacharya, Menon shows how caste eats into the very vitals of society and how it smothers the heart’s unpolluted instincts thereby cutting into the freedom of an individual.
The British officially left India on August 15th, 1947. Even before this transition of India from a colony to an ex-colony, ideological battles among the prospective inheritors of the postcolonial nation were rife. Mahatma Gandhi’s nationalism sent out a clarion call on behalf of the Congress Party to the so-called “untouchables” or outcastes of India in the name of national unity. Congressmen Jawaharlal Nehru’s vision was of a socialism combining scientific advancement and internationalism. B.R. Ambedkar demanded a separate electoral constituency for the untouchables at the Second Round Table Conference in London in 1931, and this campaign for separatism was at loggerheads with Gandhian nationalism. All these had already staked out a range of conflicted political agendas for postcolonial India even before India’s independence from British colonization. However, after independence, with the reformist Congress Party in power in the national government, Ambedkar’s agenda of radical separatism of the untouchables within a Brahminical Hindu nation-state was not implemented. Nevertheless, he not only participated in drafting newly independent India’s constitution and piloting legislation banning untouchability, but was also successful in implementing affirmative action policies for the untouchables by reserving a specified number of seats in the provincial and national legislative bodies. As Gail Omvedt underlines, Communists also co-existed in pre-independent India who, quite surprisingly, rather than affiliating with Ambedkar’s movement against untouchability, saw him as attempting to break the unity of the nation with his demand for a separate constituency for outcastes. Hence, he was labelled as pro-British (183). In fact, the Communist Party rather than establishing an independent national revolutionary political platform against imperialism, by the 1930s was working entirely from within the conservative reformism of the Congress Party.
Only in 1957 did the state of Kerala, in the far south of India, become the first region in Asia to elect a communist government through parliamentary procedure. Though moving between the late 1960s and the early 1965, Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, mostly set in Kerala, needs to be contextualized within the colonial and postcolonial power politics of India.

Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, which won Britain’s Booker Prize in 1997, revolves around Esthappen (Estha), his twin sister Rahel, and their divorced mother Ammu, all of whom live in Kerala, The central focus is on events related to the visit and drowning of the twins’ half-English cousin, Sophie Mol. These incidents happened twenty-three years back in 1969. Sophie Mol’s visit overlaps with a love affair between Ammu a higher-caste woman and the family’s carpenter Velutha, a lower-caste man, who also works in the Paradise Pickles and Preserves Factory owned by Ammu’s family. As crime and caste intertwine resulting in dire consequences for the characters, the politics behind what has often been called the “incomplete process of modernization” in India becomes clear.

In *The God of Small Things* Velutha dies in police custody on false charges of raping Ammu, framed as retaliation by Baby Kocharmna- Ammu’s aunt for violating caste taboos in sex. Ammu gradually languishes and dies a few years after Velutha’s death; Estha and Rahel are orphaned in their childhood. Terror of transgressing caste boundaries is the reigning emotion through which Ammu’s and Velutha’s passion for each other is defined. Even their most intense sexual encounters are proleptic of Velutha’s violent torture and subsequent death: Once he was inside her, fear was derailed and
biology took over. The cost of living climbed to unaffordable heights; though later Baby Kochamma would say it was a “Small Price to Pay”—

Was it?

Two lives. Two children’s childhoods.

And a history lesson for future offenders. (336)

In an interview with Emily Guntheinz, Roy, however, has emphasized: “I have to say that my book is not about history but biology and transgression.” However, a Postcolonial text like *The God of Small Things* cannot be read a historically and a text which explores, within a Postcolonial context, caste boundaries, around male and female sexuality established by pre-capitalist’ Hindu kingdoms cannot be read without contextualizing it in history.

The older generation of men in *The God of Small Things* like Rahel’s and Estha’s grandfather Pappachi, who inherited the grand title of Imperial Entomologist, are the descendants of Indians who were part of the British administrative framework in India, the Indian Civil Service. Clive Dewey’s clinching summary of the Indian Civil Service in pre--independence India in *Anglo-Indian Attitudes* underlines the immense power of this ruling class in India, drawn mostly from the best Oxbridge graduates of British origin along with some extraordinarily meritorious Indians:

A tiny cadre, a little over a thousand strong, ruled more than 300,000,000 Indians: a fifth of the human race. Each Civilian, had on average, 300,000 subjects; and each Civilian penetrated every corner of his subjects’ lives, because the ICS directed all the activities of the Anglo-Indian state. They collected the revenue, allocated rights in land, relieved famines, improved
agriculture, built public works, suppressed revolts, drafted laws, investigated crimes, judged lawsuits, inspected municipalities, schools, hospitals, cooperatives the list is endless. The long lines of petitioners, choking their verandahs and waiting patiently outside their tents, paid tribute to their power. (3)

As Julie Mullaney underlines:

[Pappachi’s] [ ... ] job of collecting, preserving, and indexing India’s fauna for the colonial archive, puts him at the heart of the colonial enterprise. On the other hand, Pappachi fulfills this role as interpreter; as entomologist he translates India for the world. On the other hand, his role in translating India represented by his discovery of a new species of moth is like the Indian Civil Service after the departure of the British, translated or transformed over time. In the same way that the whirlwind of post-Independence creates a space for the evolution of new and alternate social orders and dynamics of power (Communism, Marxism) that threaten to transform the role of his class generally, the specific rearrangement of the classifying systems in Pappachi’s chosen profession, entomology, transforms and eclipses his role in the discovery of a new species of moth. (33)

Pappachi’s son Chacko was a Rhodes Scholar to Oxford who married an Englishwoman. Mullaney highlights the dilemma between tradition and modernity faced by the post-independence Indian bourgeoisie tradition epitomized by Chacko’s masculinist elite British education and modernity by the feminine Indian self-sufficiency of Mammachi’s “Paradise, Pickles & Preserves.” Pappachi and Chacko embody the relationship in colonial India
between the British imperialists and the descendants of the Aryan invaders of India, who, as V.T. Rajshekar in his book *Dalit: The Black Untouchables of India* points out, around 1500 BC pushed to the periphery the original inhabitants of the region who are today the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes of India (43). Similarly, Velutha represents the relationship between the Communist Party and the Dalit movement of the untouchables in postcolonial India.’ The root of the word ‘Dalit’ lies in the Hebrew word “dal” meaning broken or crushed (Rajshekar 43). Dalits are a group of the kind whom scholars like Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak call subalterns after the *Prison Notebooks* of the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci (published between 1929 and 1935). In the Hindu pyramid of castes, the Brahmin or the priestly caste dominates the caste system, followed by the Kshatriyas / kings, then the Vaishyas / merchants, and finally the Sudras or the scavenger caste. The Sudras, along with the scheduled tribes, make up the vast majority of the Indian population. Scheduled caste and tribe activists like Velutha have had an ambivalent relationship with the Communist Party both in pre-independence and post-independence India. This is due to the radical Dalit movement under Ambedkar’s leadership and its relationship with the Communist Party which operated from within the conservative reformist Congress leadership of primarily Gandhi, but also Nehru.

In *The God of Small Things*, Velutha is a devoted activist for the radical worker-peasant alliance, whom Rahel once sees marching with the red flag of the Communist Party at the level crossing outside Cochin in Kerala. He is rumoured to have disappeared for four years to join the Naxalite movement – a violent Maoist peasant-student revolutionary alliance which originated in Naxalbari in the east Indian state of West Bengal in the late 1960s, and then spread to South India. However, when after Ammu’s mother Mammachi
spits on Velutha’s face as a mark of condemning him for indulging in an inter caste relationship with Ammu, Velutha goes to Comrade K.N.M. Pillai for help, he is told that he “should know that Party was not constituted to support workers’ indiscipline in their private lives” (287). By indiscipline, Pillai is referring to Velutha’s inter caste relationship with Ammu. Roy describes this as “The last betrayal that sent Velutha across the river, swimming against the current, in the dark and rain, well in time for his blind date with history” (282). The consequence of this “indiscipline” and Pillai’s refusal to help Velutha to avoid the repercussions of a caste/class based bureaucracy is the scene where Velutha lies in police custody in his own urine “[a] mangled genie invoked by a modem lamp. He was naked, his soiled mundu had come undone. Blood spilled from his skull like a secret. His face was swollen and his head looked like a pumpkin, too large and heavy for the slender stem it grew from” (320).

This anomalous ‘attitude to the “outcaste,”’ in a post independence India where untouchability is banned by the constitution, can be best understood in the perspective of what appears on the surface to be the tension between tradition and modernity in postcolonial India. In her interview with Emily Guntheinz, quoted in Allison Elliott’s “Caste in The God of Small Things”, Roy, in commenting on the caste-system, has underlined the fact that,

It’s the defining consideration in all Indian politics, in all Indian marriages [...] The lines are blurring. India exists in several centuries simultaneously. So there are those of us like me, or people that I know for instance, to whom it means nothing [...] It’s a very strange situation where there’s
sort of a gap between [...] sometimes it’s urban and rural, but it’s really a
time warp.

This is exactly what Euro-American Marxists have called the “incomplete process of
modernization” in the Third World.

Politicians like Comrade K.N.M. Pillai in *The God of Small Things* do not
rescue Dalits like Velutha when their activities clash with the interests of the postcolonial
state, erected by the collaborative efforts of Brahminism and capitalism, because people
like Pillai themselves are favourably positioned within a co-temporal bind between caste
and class, and operate, conditioned by pragmatism and opportunism. In other words,
Communism in India remains reformist rather than radical because to mobilize the scheduled
castes and tribes into a democratic revolution, as opposed to a revolution for modernization
which is the current agenda of communist leaders, would threaten their own caste-class
interests, and more importantly their bourgeois convictions about blood. So, the communist
movement in India has always side-stepped the issue of caste, never integrating caste
and class politics because to attack the blind would demolish both whereas, to merely
form a worker-peasant class alliance for reformist politic would hardly disturb the existing
power structures. Referring to his wife Kalyani, Pillai underscores the ideological dilemma
of being a Communist Party leader hailing from a bourgeois household in India: “See her,
for example. Mistress of this house. Even she will never allow Paravans and all that into
her house. Never. Even I cannot persuade her. My own wife. Of course, inside the house
she is Boss” (278).
In *Castes of Mind*, Nicholas Dirks argues that not only “tradition was produced under the sign of colonial modernity but also that it was irrevocably tainted for political purposes precisely because of this colonial history” (299). What Dirks is attempting to highlight is not only how the category of caste was reconfigured by the colonial administration, but also how British colonial politics handed down to the postcolonial nation a category of caste which was no longer merely a religious marker, but also a political one which could be used by the postcolonial elites as a bait to engender a subaltern vote bank in the electoral politics of a modern nation-state. In the postcolonial nation, subalterns like Velutha are dangerously exploited through the legacy of electoral politics that the British left for independent India. Dedicated activists, like Velutha, serve the political elites represented by Comrade Pillai, merely as part of an inner circle of party affiliates who bring hyper visibility to the party through their eagerness to demonstrate in protest marches led by the party, and their conviction of the possibility of social transformation, and hence better prospects for the Dalits. In the electoral politics of today’s India they are the mobilizers of vote-banks in the name of caste constituencies, who do not realize that the reason that they are mere cadres while the Comrade Pillais are recognized politicians within the party is that India’s unique process of modernization built on a still operative feudal base, distributes the resources of the postcolonial nation according to bloodlines. To escape the indignity and deprivation of the prevailing caste system, Velutha’s grandfather Kellan converted to the colonizer’s religion of Christianity, only to find that untouchables who converted to Christianity were still segregated through a mode of British colonial intervention which created a system of separate churches and separate priests. Moreover, as Christians in post-independence India, they were not entitled to the job reservations and low-interest bank loans which Ambedkar had legislated for the outcastes.
Arundhati Roy, prevalently known as a defender of the Dalits, the deserted, the defenceless and the voiceless, is of the opinion that the society can achieve its goal successfully only when there is no gap between the poor and the rich; between the Dalit and the possessed; between the’ Laltian’ and the’ Mombatti’. In one of her interviews, she opines:

Fiction for me has been a way of trying to make sense of the world as I know it. It is located very close to me this book. It is located in the village as I grew up in. If I had to put it very simply, it is about trying to make the connections between the smallest of things and the biggest ones and to see how they fit together. (General Knowledge Today, Nov. 1997, PA).

The novel is to be marked for its socio-political concerns. One of the major socio-political concerns is the rigid-caste structure to be seen in India. The weaker sections of the society, like the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, the Dalits and the have nots inescapably suffer a good deal in the process of caste-stratifications. Roy vividly portrays the acute suffering and deep frustration of these sections in her novel.

Kerala may be the most literate state in the country but literacy does not mean education in the deepest sense of the word. Roy tries to sensitize this thick skinned society to the cruelty of some of its traditions and dehumanizing taboos. She shows how the untouchables are treated as impersonal and subjugative objects in this social structure, how things are decided for both by the patriarchal ideology of an ancient culture which also cultivates the pervasive snobbery and violence of the ‘Touchables’ towards the ‘Untouchables’.
The god of small things in the novel is Velutha. He was the son of a Paravan—a community in Kerala which was forced to live through the ages of life of exploitation compounded by unspeakable indignity even to the extent of sweeping off their footprints as they crawled back so that a Brahmin or Syrian Christians (formerly upper caste Hindus) did not get defiled by treading on the same. By embracing Christianity, they had only received the status of ‘Untouchables Christians’ with separate Church and priest. Velutha is different from the traditional Paravan, like his submissive father or invalid brother who appear to be reconciled to their ‘destiny’; he belongs to the new generation who grew up in independent India, though his life was unhonoured, unsung and unwept.

Velutha had finished his school, got trained in carpentry in addition to his natural skill in machines and handcraft. Assuming that the communist party was a forum of protest, he joined the party. Yet he is sneered upon by the ‘Touchables’, rich and poor alike. He was watched and in fear and uneasiness by all including his father, employer, co-workers and even by local police. All this was because this Paravan was very much Un--Paravan like. He also transgressed the “Love Laws that laid down who should be loved. And how, And how much” (177).

The male protagonist Velutha is looked down upon and maltreated almost at every stage in his life. As a small boy, when he visits the Ayemenem House along with his father to deliver the coconuts plucked from the trees in the compound they are asked to come from the back entrance:

Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would, they were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched. Caste Hindus and Caste Christians ... Paravans were expected to crawl backwards
with a broom. Sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan’s footprint ... they were not allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed. (73-74)

All these were not followed by Velutha, but by his father and brother who were ‘old world’ Paravans. Velutha belonged to ‘new world’ Paravan for he was a man of protest. But are things getting better for Dalits remains a question even now. Such ‘cradle to grave’ deprivations and discriminations have rarely been the lot of any other community in India. Dalits are denied access to land; their legitimate and traditional fishing rights in ponds are taken away; they are denied access to roads and often their living space, the Cheri on the outer fringes of the village, is encroached upon by the ‘Caste Hindus’; their access to clean drinking water is virtually non-existent and their wells are often poisoned during anti-Dalit riots; the majority of Dalits are agricultural labourers with low wages and long stretches of unemployment -the list appears to be unending.

However, these deprivations and discriminations are not just economic, they are also social, cultural and political. Illiteracy among Dalits is very high and this is exploited in more ways than one. Untouchability is still widespread, including the use of ‘two glasses’ one for Dalits and the other for ‘Caste Hindus’–in tea shops. The most brutal forms of reprisal–including ‘honour killing’ of the couple by ‘caste Hindus’, seem to be reserved for inter caste marriages involving a Dalit. The discriminations are also political in nature. Often their right to vote is taken away through violent means; in some cases there is
violent reprisal by the police -because Dalits decide to boycott elections in protest. But mostly the voices of the Dalits are unheard, if at all they articulate.

There is very little solace for a Dalit in religion and even in death. The burial grounds for Dalits often lack proper approach roads, and attempts to reach these grounds through land belonging to ‘caste Hindus’ often invite reprisals. Perhaps that is why a Dalit like Velutha preferred a police station to die. The fact that Dalits have to face such deprivation, discrimination, and violence -in all their intensity and range from ‘caste Hindus’ is perhaps explicable in terms of the central role caste plays in our society. The police have often been brutal in their dealings with Dalits. One could read heart rending accounts of police brutalities meted out to Velutha in Roy’s *The God of Small Things*:

They (the police men) woke Velutha with their boots ... His skull was fractured in three places. His nose and both his cheekbones were smashed, learning his face pulpy, undefined. The blow to his mouth had split upon his upper lip and broken six teeth ... hideously inverting his beautiful smile. Four of his ribs were splintered; one had pierced his left lung, which was what made him bleed from his mouth ... His lower intestine was ruptured and haemorrhaged, the blood collected in his abdominal cavity. His spine was damaged in two places, the concussion had paralyzed his right arm and resulted in a loss of control over his bladder and rectum. Both his knee caps were shattered. (309, 310)

The administration has been insensitive, to say the least. Atrocities against Dalits and instances of Dalit assertion are treated essentially as law and order problems, not social ones. The inquiry commissions set up by the state often end up blaming the victims.
Perhaps the most notorious example of this is an inquiry commission that did a complete white-wash of police brutalities against striking workers, mostly Dalits of the Manjoli tea estate in Tirunelveli in July 1999.

While deep rooted caste prejudices and practices provide the basis for these discriminations and atrocities faced by Dalits, there is another side to this issue. And that is about Dalit assertion. And such assertion often has invited reprisals often brutal by caste Hindus and the state; by caste Christians in the novel. The Dalits are the most deprived in every sense of the term and hence, their problems would need special emphasis and attention.

Kancha Ilaiah, the author of ‘Why I Am not a Hindu’, a book that has been compared to Fanon’s ‘Wretched of the Earth’, writes as one of the ‘dalit bahujans’, whom he calls the exploited and suppressed majority in India. He describes the alienation of the castes excluded as ‘backward’ or ‘untouchable’ by Hinduism not merely from the colonial or neo-colonial western culture, but also from the dominant Postcolonial ‘Indian’ one.

Ilaiah defends Dalit cultures as intrinsically more creative, democratic and humanitarian than Hindu society, close to the manner in which Cesaire had argued that all non-western societies were superior to European ones. The line between oppressor and oppressed is, however, drawn by caste and not colonial oppression.

The caste victim Velutha is victimized by the upper caste Christians. Dalits’ conversion either to Islam, Sikhism or to Christianity is a rebellion against the existing system to find a new identity and direction for themselves. They were disgusted with the social order
and opted out when there was a chance for them to get out of the system which heaped all the indignities on them. Hence, conversion can be called a movement to assert and realize the basic human rights and dignity. Whereas the upper caste Christians wanted to have separate identity they did not want further conversion from Dalits and divide the Church further. They wanted to have an image of casteless better position to represent that so called untouchables. It is, thus, an accepted fact that Christianity gave birth to Dalit movement in India in the first instance wittingly or unwittingly.

Christianity as a religion absorbs caste system as a factor in the social fabric and upholds the equality of all human beings. This fact pre-supposes that Christianity is an egalitarian religion. Discrimination of humans on the basis of caste, colour, wealth and race is the violation of Biblical ethics. However, a dichotomy exists between percepts and practices. The Dalits are discriminated within the Church. They are subjugated to all kinds of oppression, both by the high caste Hindus, the state and the Church. Because of their conversion to Christianity, their claim to reservation is not considered.

During the nineteenth century, caste restricts continued to operate within the Anglican Church. Separation between Pulaya Christians and other upper caste Syrian Christians was retained quite strictly in different areas of Church life. General social customs relating to ‘untouchability’ were preserved within the Anglican Church mainly because of Syrian Christian notions of themselves as high castes. Syrian Christians often thought of their community in this way, owing to the Syrian Christians assimilation into the prevalent caste system and the acceptance of several high caste Hindu customs, and furthermore, the historical acceptance of the Syrian Christians’ status as almost equivalent to that of the Nairs by the Travancore ruling classes. This superiority feeling determined their
relationships to other subordinate castes. As a result, Christians observed untouchability as the Hindus did towards Pulayas.

Kerala society posed a peculiar situation for the missionaries where Syrian Christians had already acquired a caste-like position in the social hierarchy. Although the intensity and manifestations of it varied regionally, the notion of *theendal* (pollution through touch and social contact) for instance survived in the minds of Syrian Christians into twentieth century. There was a sufficient indication to the poor and Pulaya Christians, that caste feeling within the Church was not declining but intensifying. They belonged in the caste hierarchy within the Church and in the larger society.

When St. Thomas converted several Namboodiri Brahman families to Christianity some decades after the death of Christ, this conversion was taken to mean the loss of caste status: According to LK An.K. Ayyar, “Syrian Christians were thus segmented off from their original group. However, they took with them certain privileges including their attendant castes. Converts from labourer and artisan castes related to their Syrian patrons in much the same way as they had to the higher Hindu castes” (10). Syrian Christians have been seen as part of the Hindu caste system in many anthropological studies. Syrian Christians claimed to be apostasied from Namboodiri Brahmins, and claimed higher status than the Nairs, who were next only to Brahmins. The Hindu kings, pleased with the hardworking and prosperous Syrian Christians gave them privileges and honour distinguishing them as a high caste.

Syrian Christians are dictated to in the modalities of choice-making with regard to food, occupation, marriage, birth and death and their accompanying rituals by their identity as a caste group. Strict rules regarding the eating and distribution of food existed
in the traditional system. Lower castes were not allowed in the kitchen but were fed separately on ritual occasions, being considered capable of ‘polluting’ Christians.

Untouchability in the Postcolonial era has not been completely abolished. It is still prevalent in various forms mainly in Indian villages. Roy focuses on this burning social problem in a realistic and poignant way. In the opinion of Mahatma Gandhi untouchability is a social evil which ought to be extirpated from India. People still hold the belief that the Paravans give out a bad smell from their body. This idea is formed because they do such menial jobs like manual scavenging and so on. This practice is still widespread. For example, The Hindu reports of untouchability still prevalent at Uthapuram, a village near Madurai. This did not happen some fifty years back, but on July 10,2010.

According to the General Secretary of Volunteers’ of the Tamil Nadu, Untouchability Eradication Front, Shri. K. Samuel Raj says that, “Only the wall at Uthapuram has been removed. But the Dalits there are still not allowed to use the common pathway.” The Dalits are still denied permission to offer worship to the ‘arasamaram’ (peepal tree). “The Muthalamman temple and the tree are very much on government land. But the Dalits are prevented from offering their prayers by constructing a wall across the approach pathway from the Dalit residential area,” he added. It is also reported that instead of supporting the people who were struggling for their democratic rights, the police were trying to suppress them to ensure that there could not be any more Dalit upsurge. The caste Hindus did not want the Dalits to share even the bus shelter which was constructed by a Rajya Sabha member.
Thus, untouchability is a prevalent social practice of ostracizing a (usually) minority endogamous group by regarding them as ‘ritually polluted’ and segregating them from the mainstream by social custom or legal mandate. Untouchability has been illegal in post-independence India but prejudice continues.

More than 160 million people in India are considered ‘Untouchables’—people tainted by their birth into a caste system that treats them as impure, and less than human. A random sampling of headlines in mainstream Indian newspapers tells their story:

Dalit Boy Beaten To Death For Plucking Flowers
Dalit Tortured By Cops For 3 Days
Dalit ‘Witch’ Paraded Naked in Bihar
7 Dalits Burnt Alive In Caste Clash
5 Dalits Lynched In Harayana

Dalit Woman Gang Raped, Paraded Naked

In September 2010, in an incident that took place in Tirunelveli; a university Vice-chancellor was man handled and he was a Dalit. Nearly 90% of all the poor Indians and 95% of all the illiterate Indians are Dalits, according to figures presented at the International Dalit Conference that took place between May 16 and 18, in Vancouver, Canada, in 2003.

Velutha, in Roy’s novel is ill-treated by Mammachi and others despite his craftsmanship and talents. The upper caste society feel terribly disturbed when they see Dalits getting educated and occupying high posts. If a Dalit is educated, he is conveniently called an educated Dalit and not treated on par with them. So the feeling of segregation
is deeply rooted in the Indian’s inhuman belief. Mahatma Gandhi called it, ‘a disgrace on Hinduism’.

After Independence, various constitutional rights were provided to uplift the oppressed community. Amendment after amendment have been introduced but the centuries old disgust towards untouchables has not yet changed. That disgust has taken a new shape, like old wine in new bottles. In democratic India, even at the beginning of the 21st century, untouchability still exists. Roy has pictured Velutha in her novel because such conditions are prevalent even in modern times.

Velutha, the son of Vellya Paapen, a toddy tapper, acquires training in the craft of carpentry. But his technical expertise and his religious status as a converted Christian do not grant him immunity from victimization in a casteist society. In Roy’s depiction of the rituals that dominate relationship between Syrian Christian households and the Paravans one can see how easily Christianity assimilated itself to caste in Kerala. Velutha is a new world Paravan in a Kerala led by communist leaders. His mysterious disappearance and suspicions of Naxalite connections combine to give an elusive, magical quality. That Paravans do not wear shirts allows Roy to experiment with various perceptions. For Rahel his back is the symbol of his paternalistic love for her: ‘She knew his back. She’d been carried on it. More times than she could count’(84). But for Ammu, his body becomes an erotic object for the gaze to transfix itself upon in a voyeuristic manner:

“A little way away, Velutha walked up the short cut through the rubber trees. Barebodied ... She knew the ridges of muscle on Velutha’s stomach grow taung (sic) and rise under his skin like the divisions on a slab of chocolate. She wondered at how his body had changed so quickly from a

An intense instance of social humiliation has gone almost unnoticed in Roy’s authorial eyes.

It is only as an afterthought that Roy mentions Ammu’s hope (suddenly arisen) that Velutha shares the “living, breathing anger against the smug, ordered world that she so raged against” (176). It is not Velutha’s own anger against a rigidly stratified society that Ammu empathizes with. As part of the feudal landowning Syrian Christian community of Kerala, her angst is directed towards the rigid codes that limit her life and choices. In many ways more than either she or the narrator can acknowledge, she does occupy a position of privilege in comparison with Velutha. They share something in common. She refuses to conform to the rules ordained for ‘motherhood’ and ‘divorcehood’, refused to categorize herself among the list of those ‘washed up’ by life. He refuses to symbolically crawl backwards with a broom as his ancestors have had to do literally in the past, and both transgress the ‘love laws’ in loving each other.

But there is one fundamental difference. His tragedy is representative of the fate of the untouchables. And what gives this tragedy meaning is not the love of a bourgeois divorced woman. Velutha is ‘The God of Small Things’ and his elevation to a position of God-hood marks the real degradation and struggle in the lives of Paravans of Keralas. Historical accounts or the struggle for freedom by the depressed classes in South India reveal a great degree of anger and frustration at Brahmin oligarchy. Even the response to the mainstream nationalist movement was marked by a feeling of alienation and neglect
on the part of the untouchables. Many were loyalists for the British Empire precisely because they feared that their fates would be doomed if the upper-caste led Congress Party come to power. The role of the communists ameliorating the social conditions of untouchability is underplayed by Roy.

In his essay, “Communists and their social activities in Malabar,” V.V. Kukikrishnan writes of the contribution of communists in mobilizing the peasants and workers of Kerala. Schools and reading rooms were established. Mass education programmes were launched which attempted to create a cultural change among the illiterate and the impoverished people. Roy recognises these contributions in passing. But she concludes by insisting that, in fact, communism succeeded because it worked within the communal divides and never challenged them.

Roy’s stance in her presentation of the lower caste individual, Velutha, is patronizing. A study of other novelists’ depiction of Dalit characters is similar. It evokes pity for the suffering of these individuals. In relation to these characters the author casts herself in the role of the liberal narrator who sees something in these characters, beyond what the world can see. In a term now famous in postcolonial studies the author functions as the Insider-Outsider. The choice of language and the metropolitan location of the publisher creates a certain audience with limited access to the real lives of individuals oppressed by caste-tyranny. The author, being Indian, is thus naturally cast as an expert in these areas. In those terms she is the insider. But by stressing their own distance and alienation from this society, the author simultaneously reinforces her position as the Outsider.

Roy’s novel articulates certain issues that arise in any caste based society. While it has been widely acknowledged that caste plays an important role within Indian society,
what is less widely known is how rigid and elaborate the caste structure of Kerala really was. The lowest castes were bonded to particular high-caste households for whom they were always on call as labourers or servants. They lived in land owned by the master households and could be evicted at will if they displeased them. They were forbidden entry into temples, not allowed to enter public markets or bathe in temple ponds. Neither men nor women were allowed to wear shirts, blouses or covering clothes above the waist.

More importantly for an understanding of the tragedy of Velutha, the lower castes were forbidden to come physically within prescribed distances of higher-caste members and could be punished by death for violating this taboo. Roy recognizes this fear in Velutha when he asks himself, “What’s the worst thing that can happen? I could lose everything. My job. My family. My livelihood. Everything” (334). But she romanticizes his motivation. For Roy, Velutha’s dominant emotion is love. But common sense tells us that the dominant emotion for any individual oppressed by society would be anger. Anger could motivate Velutha to make love to a higher caste woman in defiance of all the taboos that forbid such a union, making love to such a woman would be significant move in the caste warfare.

Also, in her gross parody of the Communist leaders, Roy ignores the significant contributions that comments have made in giving caste reform in Kerala a unique profile. Evidence reveals that in the aftermath of the temple entry struggles of the 1920s and 1930s, after Sri Narayana Guru’s pioneering efforts to bring dignity to the untouchables, the untouchables and their lower caste allies became increasingly more united with Kerala’s trade union and the communist movement. This alliance resulted in a frontal attack on
some of the caste system’s features. Anthropologist Kathleen Gough notes that although all the major political groups in Kerala officially preached an end to untouchability, it is the communists who eat in the homes and tea shops of Harijans, organize drama clubs among them, file suits on their behalf, and agitate for fixed tenures, higher wages and a share in the land. High caste radicals have had a large role to play in making caste reform movements fairly peaceful in Kerala. Apart from the role of communists in helping to win benefits such as land reform and higher wages, the simple acts of breaking the eating taboos or crossing the thresholds of each others’ houses has had a powerful effect of subverting all notions of purity and pollution. An active policy of reservation in government jobs assures greater government response to incidents of caste violence and victimization. The elected communist government of 1957 included four Pulaya cabinet members.

What emerges from this is an understanding of the ways in which authorial ideology intervenes with the working out of the text in a way what distorts reality. Velutha is not really a character in Roy’s novel. He is more of a dark, symbolic figure who inhabits the fantasies of the sexually unfulfilled. His caste status adds to his allure of being forbidden. Though passing references are made to his anger or arrogance, the thrust of the narrative eroticizes his presence making his dominant features those of a raw animal sensuality. He is always seen through the eyes of the ‘others’ who surround him, never through his own eyes. Sometimes he is god-like:

As he rose from the dark river and walked up the stone steps, she saw that the world they stood in was his. That he belonged to it. That it belonged to him. The water. The mud. The trees. The fish. The stars. He moved so easily through it. As she watched him she understood the quality of his
beauty. How his labour had shaped him. How the wood he fashioned had fashioned him. Each plank he planned, each nail he drove, each thing he made had moulded him. Had left its stamp on him. Had given him his strength, his supple grace. (333-334)

Sometimes he is a victim. Always, he is acted upon. Never does he act or question the status quo: Even his nakedness, a visual symbol of the degraded and debased position of the lowest caste is erotically transformed into something magnificent.

Velutha can be compared to Mulk Raj Anand’s Bakha. Anand presents a truthful portrayal of untouchability in his famous novel *Untouchable*. Bakha, the protagonist of the novel, has to suffer insult and abuse without any rhyme or reason. He suffers only because he is an untouchable. In a fit of anger he bursts out:

Why are we always abused? The Sanitary Inspector that day abused my father. They always abuse us. Because were sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it too; that is why I came here. I was tired of working on the latrines everyday. That is why they don’t touch us, high castes. (58)

Anand adored Bakha as a hero from his childhood “because he was physically like a god, played all the games superbly and could recite whole cantos from the epic poem Heer Ranjah of Waris Shah ...” (37). Anand, like Arundhati Roy was obsessed with Bakha’s tragedy which lay in the fact that this extraordinarily talented boy was always insulted by most of the people because of his low caste. So Bakha is also a god of small things.
When Bakha is in trouble, Colonel Hutchinsen tells him to “come to Jesus in the girya ghar” whereas Roy’s Velutha suffers humiliation at the hands of Syrian Christians and is even betrayed by a Left wing leader. Thus, no religion brings a sure solution to the problem of untouchability. Perverted orthodoxy in the name of religion and the deadness of human feelings become the twin evils which promote untouchability in the society. Dr. Radha Krishnan has observed that,

The institution of caste illustrates the spirit of comprehensive synthesis characteristic of the Hindu mind with its faith in the collaboration of races and the co-operation of cultures. Paradoxically, as it may seem the system of caste is the outcome of tolerance and trust. Though it has now degenerated into an oppression and intolerance, though it tends to perpetuate inequality and develop the spirit of exclusiveness these unfortunate effects are not the central motives of the system. (69)

Thus, casteism becomes a pivotal issue in the Indian society and it crosses the point of tolerance as evidenced in Roy’s *The God of Small Things*.

Whenever an untouchable is accused of any crime, the touchable become united to remove him for ever. Velutha is a victim of brutality of the majority and the flatterers of the majority. When human rights and values are seriously taken into consideration globally, in rural India, this sort of atrocity against Dalits are rampant. The Ayemenem incident of killing Velutha is the microscopic vision of the orthodoxy’s brutality against Dalits. The legal protections are still on paper. Unless the social attitude changes, no social evil can
be eradicated. Society should not further lose more talented Veluthas who is certainly “The God of Loss”.

Roy, thus, points out some unnoticed shades of a social problems which are usually overlooked by the eyes of social scientists. Velutha’s grandfather Kelan, along with other untouchables, embraces Christianity to escape the curse of untouchability. But to everybody’s dismay, they find that they have done a blunder. They are given separate Churches and separate priests, and in a special favour, they are even given their own separate Pariah Bishop. After 1947, they were not entitled to any government benefits like job reservation nor bank loans at low interest, because they were considered casteless. Roy says: “It was like having to sweep away your prints without a broom. Or worse, not being allowed to leave foot-prints at all” (74).

When Ammu has no one to take care of her and her twin children, it is only natural that she becomes fascinated towards the person who loves her and kids, even though he is an untouchable Dalit. Velutha teaches the twins boating and fishing. The kids enjoy being around him because they do not know “What was untouchability”. The friendly meetings of the twins and Velutha brings them nearer to each other, the twins, Velutha and Ammu, themselves outcasts in differing ways.

Gradually the young Ammu is attracted towards his exercised body – “A swimmer’s body”. Velutha also feels the same passion. Both of them forget the ban “who should be loved, And how, and how much” (17). There are plenty of evidences in ancient literature of India regarding the ban. According to Matsya Puran, the untouchables are not allowed to love or marry upper caste women, while the other varna’s allowed to defile/rape any
untouchable women. Actually, intercaste relationship was, thus, banned. The verse is translated like this:

If a low caste man wants to marry a high caste girl, and does so, he would be punished with death. Similarly, a high caste woman marrying a low caste man, should be punished with death. (CCXXVI, 131, II, Matsya Puran)

But Ammu and Velutha, both had overthrown the imposed law. Ammu’s aunt, Baby Kochamma mainly opposes the affair because it was with an untouchable. Would she have allowed if the man was a ‘touchable’ remains a question too. She says: “How could she stand the smell, haven’t you noticed, they have a particular smell? These Paravans.” (78) This incident was more than enough to remove the untouchable for her. Out of hate and a sense of revenge, she files an FIR against an untouchable that has motives hidden deep down the woman’s hidden psyche.

Ammu’s and Velutha’s crime was love. They both had thrown away the imposed social code but not the Christian Code. Even after 60 years of Independence, Untouchability is alive, rather, kept alive, and thriving in India’s hinterlands. The following is the sorrowful news printed in The Indian Express dated 21.10.2009. The headline is: “Dalit Children Segregated In Anganwadis In Theni District”. This is reported by a journalist, Mr. P. Krishnaswamy of Theni. Twin-tumbler system, ostracisation of families and other such inhuman treatment had so far affected only the Dalit men and women. There were also incidents of Dalit students in schools being marginalized. But the incident reported from a village in their district puts all these atrocities in shade, as the victims of this discrimination are kids of 2-5 years.
Vimala, a Dalit woman in Ammapatti village in Vadapudupatti Panchayat of Periyakulam block in Theni district, submitted a petition to Balasubramanian, SP, on October 14, 2008, stating that the Dalit children were being kept segregated in the Anganwadi and untouchability was rampant in the village in various forms. The Dalit children who are catered to by the Anganwadi, have to bring their own utensils from home to receive the food while the children of caste Hindus are offered their food on stainless steel plates available in the Anganwadi.

Even while playing the children of the two communities were kept separated. They should neither hold nor touch hands. These restrictions are imposed by the Anganwadi staff. The Director of Evidence, A. Kadir, in a statement said that sowing the seeds of caste discord in the minds of young children and the treatment meted to the Dalit kids was highly condemnable. It was strange that the powers that be were indifferent to these atrocities.

Pockets of social change have been but mere drops in an ocean of casteism and prejudice. This was borne out in a survey by National Law School, Bangalore, which was reported recently. Following this, the Time of India correspondents did a reality check in eight states across India. Dalits are still segregated with little access to temples, water sources and upper caste areas. And ironically, even in Radha Nagar in Hooghly district, the birth place of social reformer Raja Ram Mohan Roy, there are separate crematoria for Brahmins and non-Brahmins. And in a bizarre case in Waganagere Village in Gulbarga district in Kamataka, 120 Dalit households were forced to draw water from their well even after a dog fell in and died. During festivities, not only are they served food separately, but they have to bring their own plates and tumblers. Gulbarga, incidentally,
has 126 cases registered under the SC/ST prevention of Atrocities Act 1989 and the Protection of Civil Rights Act 1955, the highest in Karnataka.

In Uttar Pradesh, almost every village has a Charmar toli, a place segregated for them. Dalit children are made to sit separately in schools. In Malsaa village in Kanpur Dehat, though the post of gram Pradhan was reserved for scheduled castes, it has been lying vacant as not a Dalit has the courage to contest the election, fearing backlash from the dominant Thakurs. And when they do, as two Dalits did last year, their candidature was rejected because no one, not even Dalits, seconded them during the filing of nomination papers. Uniquely in UP, untouchability is practised by Dalits too.

In Rajasthan’s Dholeria Shashan village near Pali, new comers are interrogated and if they are scheduled castes, entry is tough. They also cannot pass upper caste houses wearing footwear or headgear, says poet and writer Vinod Vithall.

Segregation is also blighting the next generation. In Rajpur tehsil, 60 km from Kanpur, Thakurs withdrew their children from a primary school after a Dalit cook was employed to prepare mid-day meals.

D Shyam Babu, senior fellow, Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, says that authorities often turn a blind eye to caste atrocities. Acts which protect the lower castes are not implemented either. The National Commission for Scheduled Castes in Chandigargh admitted that it receives 3-4 complaints daily. Ajmer district Police reportedly has recorded 360 cases pertaining to SCs/STs over the last 18 months.

But Dalits have now started asserting themselves. “In Tamil Nadu, upper castes are now at the receiving end after two decades of virulent clashes. In Punjab, thanks to
the Green Revolution and prosperity most Dalits have a good lifestyle,” says Balwinder Singh Sindhu, a government official, though there are pockets of discrimination.

Individuals have made a difference too. Tamil Nadu Inspector General of Police Pratheep V. Philip has started a social justice tea party where the Police provides tea to villagers and counsels them against discriminating Dalits. Two months back in Alwar, a Brahmin invited Dalits to his daughter’s wedding. In rural Bengal, says social scientist Amal Mukhopadhyay, inter-caste marriages too are taking place.

Everyone is delighted to hear that casteism is becoming boredom to some if not to many. But yet, yonder a bright light begins to appear, may be a mere speck. But with everyone’s will and desire, there soon is going to be a dawn. Then, surely India will shine and will continue B.R. Ambedkar’s dream of an India where the untouchables are not a sub-division of Hindus, but a separate and distinct element in the national life.