The Village as a Conceptual / Mental Space

CHAPTER V

The Village as a Conceptual/Mental Space.

Belief in God has sustained mankind for millennia. It has fulfilled man's psychological necessities. Indian culture and civilisation has such a distinct root in the past that there is no dearth of gods and goddesses. As Frazer says, "But perhaps no country in the world has been so prolific of human gods as India"(1963:126). Protection is the main idea behind the conception of God. "The majority of Indians are Hindus and thirty three thousand gods are spoken of in the Sacred Texts of Hindus"(Pillai, 1958:v). With so many gods and goddesses in their background, Indian people cannot think of their existence without them. The Indian villagers are firm believers in Gods and Goddesses. Most of Narayan's characters believe in many gods, following the common practice of the Hindu society. Narayan's characters are more religious than the characters of Anand or Markandaya. Gods are believed to have physical forms: human and non-human. Idol worship or worshipping the picture of gods, which is very common, is the result of such beliefs. The characters of his novels also believe in sacred things and sacred places. For example, in *The Painter of Signs*, Raman's aunt and Sriram's granny in *Waiting for the Mahatma* go to Benares during their last days to end their life. There is a double benefit in staying at Benares. They can bathe in the holy river Ganges thrice a day and pray in the temple. It is believed that such an act dissolves their sins and hence eases their passage to heaven after their death. Raman's aunt says: "It is the ambition of everyone of my generation to conclude this existence at Kasi, to be finally dissolved in the Ganges. That is the most auspicious end of one's life" (152). The concept of God, the supreme power behind the creation and regulation of the universe, is best expressed in *The Painter of Signs* by the Town Hall Professor sitting cross-legged on the parapet delivering a spiritual message to the small circle of listeners. He says: "So why worry about anything? God is in all this. He is one and indivisible. He is in yesterday, tomorrow and today. If you think it over properly, you will never sigh for anything coming or going" (25). In *The Vendor of Sweets*, Jagan, a real devotee, reads the *Bhagavad Gita* and worships God whenever he feels worried.
Most Indians read scriptures like the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* etc. daily and they also give offerings to the Gods; Narayan’s characters, who are very religious and God-fearing, offer prayers to God and beg His boon for their well being. True to the nature of the rural folk, they offer prayers at home and visit temples daily. Srinivas in *Mr. Sampath* worships a small image of Natraj, which was given to him by his grandmother when he was a boy. He never starts his day’s work without spending a few minutes before this image. “He often sat before it, contemplated its proportion and addressed it” (18). In *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, Natraj’s prayer, which exhorted his whole being for saving the elephant, Kumar, was responded to. Jagan, in *The Vendor of Sweets*, offers coconuts to Lord Ganesha, when he receives a letter from his son Mali. The women in Narayan’s novels offer prayers to the gods and promise offerings when they are in difficulties. We find childless couples, offering prayers to God for a son. In *The Financial Expert*, Maragayya prays for a son and takes a vow to give his weight in silver rupees to the Lord of Tirupati, if a male child is born. After the birth of Balu, Maragayya and his wife wear saffron-dyed clothes and carry their son in their arms and beg for alms. He remembers “how he carried the alms and the sovereigns equal to the weight of the child to the Tirupati Hills and deposited them all in the treasure box of the shrine” (132). The same Margayya in his later years carries out a forty-day ordeal of fasting and praying to Goddess Laxmi in order to propitiate her to acquire wealth. In *The Vendor of Sweets*, Jagan and his wife are taken to the God on Badri Hill to receive blessings for the birth of a child:

As if in fulfilment of the coconut seller’s prophesy Mali was born. The very minute he was delivered in the village home of his mother, he was weighed on scale pan, even before the midwife could clean him up properly, and an equivalent weight in gold, silver and corn was made up to be delivered to the God on Badri Hill, according to the solemn vow made during their visit. (179)

People of Malgudi also believe in the illumination of the mind through prayers or mantras. Such types of prayers are offered to the Sun God. Natraj in *The Man-eater of Malgudi* says: “When the east glowed I sat for a moment on the sand reciting a prayer to
the Sun to illuminate my mind”(5). In an hour of distress, every Indian prays to God to bring him out of difficulty. Not only that, whatever happens in his life, he attributes it to God’s will. In Swami and Friends, Ebenezer’s saying in the class that God would readily help those that prayed to Him had the desired effect on Swami. He secured a small card box, placed in it a couple of pebbles and covered them with fine sand and leaves. He carried the box to the pooja room in which a few framed pictures of the gods hung on the wall. Swami stood before the gods and with great piety, prayed to them to convert the pebbles into two three-pie coins. With closed eyes he muttered: “Oh, Shri Rama! Thou hast slain Ravana though he had ten heads, can’t you give me six pies?” (70). Swami is afraid of the gods and he does nothing that may insult them. To his shock, when he found that the pebbles, the leaves and the sand were still there without any expected change even after ten minutes, he was filled with rage. He wanted to abuse the Gods, but at the same time he was terribly afraid, lest he would incur the wrath of Gods. Nonsensical ideas then entered his mind:

He paused and doubted if the Gods would approve of even this. He was afraid that it might offend them. He might get on without money, but it was dangerous to incur the wrath of Gods; they might make him fail in his examinations, or kill father, mother, granny or the baby. (71)

With a feeling of regret, Swaminathan picked up the box, the sand, the leaves and the pebbles that were crushed, crumpled and kicked a minute ago in wild rage, and buried the box reverentially. Again, Swami offers prayers to God, for saving the life of an ant. Once he ran away from his school and walked far into the dense growth of trees. It was soon night and he was afraid. It appeared to his mind that a huge monster was crouching with its immense black legs wide apart and its shadowy arms joined over its head. Swami prayed to all the gods that he knew, to take him out of that place. He promised them offerings, two coconuts every Saturday to the elephant-faced Ganpati, a vow to roll bare bodied in the dust, beg and take the alms to the lord of Tirupati.

The religious beliefs of the villagers influenced every facet of their lives, including their daily chores and schedules. In The Guide, his father saw to that Raju woke
up early in the morning and said his prayers before venturing out. He woke him up at
daybreak when the cockerel made its shattering cry. Raju says:

I washed myself at the well smeared holy ash on my forehead, stood before the
framed pictures of Gods hanging high up on the wall, and recited all kinds of
sacred verse in a loud, ringing tone. After watching my performance for a while
my father slipped away to the backyard to milk the buffalo. (11)

Along with the faith in Gods and prayers India is also a land of strange and
extraordinary beliefs. It is quite interesting to observe the different types of beliefs of the
rural folk, which Narayan and others portray in their novels. But some of these beliefs
seem to be superstitious in nature. When many persons share or learn a belief and exhibit
some commitment to it, it is called a belief system. James T. Borheck defines the belief
system as “a set of related ideas (learned or shared), which has some permanence and to
which individuals and/or group exhibits some commitment” (1975:5). Louis P. Pojman
writes about how beliefs are created:

Beliefs are things that occur in mind, not something we choose. The person who
possesses a belief is more instinctive and less meditative. But what he perceives
through instinct has some valid rational ground. (1986:191)

About the rationality of religious belief Alstair McKinnon writes:

The foundations of religious belief are necessarily true and they are intended and
accepted by the believer as such. For him these foundations are self-evident
truths, which he cannot even conceive as doubtful. It is, therefore, clear that the
foundations of belief are certain and that belief itself is not irrational. (1970:95)

Although there is no watertight division between beliefs and superstitions, there is
some difference between the two. What is belief for one set of people may be superstition
for others. Superstition is defined in terms of beliefs. The Oxford Dictionary defines it as
“irrational or unfounded belief in general”. What may be rational for us at one place or at
a particular point of time may be irrational for other persons, or at another place or at another point of time. This line of thought leads to the conclusion that superstition is relative to time and place. Superstition may have several other definitions, like the irrational fear of the unknown, or a practice, ritual or belief based on mysterious and misdirected reverence, but an easily understandable and acceptable definition would be customary practice, belief or opinion with no apparently rational basis and carried on from generation to generation without its significance being questioned. This definition of superstition includes both belief and superstition. Beliefs and superstitions are universal, but India, with its deep religious background and age-old customs and traditions, abounds in them. But there are some beliefs, which completely lack rational justification. There need not be any hesitation in calling them superstitions. There may be superstitious beliefs and superstitious customs and practices. Both beliefs and customs or traditions may be outdated because whatever was perceived or proved useful at a particular time or place may not be perceived or proved useful if time and place change.

There are again some beliefs and even superstitions connected with the Gods. In The Financial Expert when the priest offered some milk to Margayya, the latter pushed aside the tumbler with his left hand. The priest warned Margayya not to refuse milk when offered, as milk is considered to be Goddess Lakshmi Devi. According to the priest, those who insulted the goddess would be punished by her. Again, in The English Teacher, Krishnan tells his daughter that they should first wash and then only touch books “Because it is [book] Goddess Saraswati and we must never touch her without washing” (124). Perhaps this is a method to inculcate respect for knowledge and learning. Again, it was a universal belief among the Hindus that to become rich one has to propitiate Goddess Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth. When she throws a glance on someone, he becomes rich, he becomes prosperous, he is treated by the world as an eminent man, and his words are treated as something of importance. Similarly Saraswathi was the Goddess of learning and those who wished to acquire knowledge tried to obtain Her blessings. They believed:
... when Saraswathi favours a man, the other Goddess withdraws her favours. There is a rivalry between the two — between the patronage of the spouse of Vishnu and the spouse of Brahma. Some persons have the good fortune to be claimed by both; some on the contrary have the misfortune to be abandoned by both. (40)

This belief perhaps gained ground because very often in the society, a very rich man is not a very learned man and vice versa. Still another belief was that Shiva’s two eyes represent the Sun and the Moon and the third eye represents Fire. He opens his third eye when he wants to destroy. But ‘fire’ is not only the symbol of destruction but also of life-giving force. Shiva destroys in order to create something better. In Mr. Sampath, we find that Shiva:

... one day, opening his eyes, he realises that passion is stirring within him, and looking about for the cause he sees Kama, the Lord of Love, aiming his shaft at him. At this, enraged, he opens his third eye in the forehead and reduces Kama to ashes. (101)

The villagers of Kanthapura have great faith in their Goddess. The old woman’s faith in the Goddess is unshakeable as is evident from the following account:

Then there was cholera. We gave a sari and a gold trinket to the goddess, and the goddess never touched those that are to live; as for the old ones, they would have died one way or the other anyway. Of course, you will tell me that young Sankamma, Barber Channav’s wife, died of it. But then it was not for nothing her child was born ten months and four days after he was dead. Ten months and four days, I tell you! Such whores always die untimely. Ramappa and Subbanna, you see, they got it in town and our goddess could do nothing. She is the Goddess of Kanthapura, not of Talassana. They ought to have stayed in Talassana and gone to Goddess Talasanamma to offer their prayers. (3)
The people of Kanthapura believe the myth about Kenchamma. They believe that in the past Kenchamma came down from the Heavens to rescue the people of Kanthapura. “She [Kenchamma] killed a demon ages, ages ago, a demon that had come to ask our young sons as food and our young women as wives” (2). They believe that Kenchamma will also save them from the British. Like Goddess Ganga, Kenchamma will come down from the Heavens to rescue the Kanthapurians from the draconian rule of the white men, the *phirangis*. Likewise the villagers believe that Gandhi was born on the request of sage Valmiki to Lord Brahma. Like Ravana, the British had come to kidnap “our political freedom, our ‘Swaraja’” (258). Gandhi’s visit to England to attend the Round Table Conference in 1931 is described in terms of the Indian mythical tradition. It is like Rama’s visit to Lanka to save Sita from the hands of Ravana. Sita is the ‘Swaraja’ and Ravana ‘the British’. The people of Kanthapura have no doubts about the myth in connection with the death of Ramakrishnayya. They believe that it was not an ordinary night:

And that night, sister, as on no other night, no cow would give its milk, and all the night a steady rain kept pattering on the tiles, and the calves pranced about their mothers and groaned. Lord may such be the path of our outgoing soul. (145)

The scriptural belief that the birth of a son is necessary for the salvation of the father is pointed out with perfection in many Indian novels, especially in Bhattacharya’s *Music for Mohini*:

Our ancestors in heaven are joyful when a son is born to the house on earth. The family name will be carried for one more span or life on earth, and at the funeral anniversary of the departed, sacrificial water should be poured. (140)

It was perhaps of this belief that Nathan and Rukma were disappointed when a daughter was born to them first. Markandaya illustrates the reaction of the parents when a girl child is born. She is not at all welcome. The parents and relatives turn their heads away and even hate to have a look at the newly born girl child. They believe that a girl child will only bring them woe:
Irawaddy was born as an unwelcome child to her parents. The simple reason was that she was a girl child. Even her mother expressed deep disappointment the moment she was born: “I turned away and despite myself, the tears came, tears of weakness and disappointment; for what woman wants a girl for her first-born?” (14)

Nathan also paid very little attention to her in the initial days of her birth. But when their first son was born Nathan was happier than words could describe. He invited everybody to the feast on the tenth day from birth of the child. In the village, much more than in the city, a childless woman or a widow is believed to be an ill-fated one who brings bad luck. And so she is not allowed to participate in any auspicious function. She has to cut her hair and wear a white sari. She could wear no ornaments. Ratna in *Kanthapura* was such a widow.

Another belief that remained deep-rooted in the minds of the village folk was the belief in their *kismet* or fate. They had firm faith in *karma* also. In *Two Leaves and a Bud*, Gangu strongly believes in his fate. He blames his *kismet* for all the miseries that happen to him. Gangu says: “I suppose it was in our kismet. But at the time it was like a prison and here it is slightly worse” (193). So also the central split in *The Big Heart* is between those who believe in fate and those who show defiance to such a concept. The fatalists like Bhago and Ananta’s stepmother Karmo (as in the case of Laxmi in *Coolie*), emphasising their belief in *karma* would humbly say: “We belong to suffering, sister. We belong to suffering! This life is not worth living! All we can do is to do some good deeds and prepare for the next”(101). But on the other hand, for Ananta and his friends, the doctrine of fate is nonsensical. Ananta considers fatalism as a self-destructive, fiendish belief, a serious obstacle to human progress:

“Fate! Fate! Fate doesn’t dictate anything. I beg you to stop this kind of talk, ohe brothers, all of you, students, Maulvis and Pandits!” shrieked Ananta, desperate with anger with anger and futility. “Ohe, come to your senses and let us call all our brotherhood together and resolve upon some course for our betterment. Men
make of their own deeds, they make of their own character, good or bad, and they shape of their own destiny! So come and make your own fate.” (210)

Most of the characters of Narayan believe in fate and karma. It is fate, which makes Raju, in The Guide, a martyr. “He drew his finger across his brow and said, ‘whatever is written here will happen. How can we ever help it?’” (20). Natraj in The Man Eater of Malgudi believes that man is a mere puppet in the hands of fate, and that he has actually nothing in his hands to change his lot. Mari in The Dark Room also thinks that he should have left Savitri to her fate. Even if he had not saved her from being drowned, she would have been saved if fate had wished so. These are just a few examples, but the supremacy of fate is inextricably woven into the very texture of Narayan’s novels. According to the theory of karma, one’s lot is pre-ordained, and it being a result of the sins one has committed in one’s previous birth, one has to discharge one’s duties ungrudgingly. This has resulted in total submission to one’s fate. For fear of punishment in hell, all have got to put up with insults and cruelties heaped upon them. Hence no wonder that a poor peasant like Velan should have great faith in Raju whom he considers a Godman. The concept of the previous birth is also enunciated in A Tiger for Malgudi. Whatever spiritual transformation Raja undergoes is only due to the achievements of his previous birth. He would have been, perhaps, the brother of his master in his previous birth. Raman in The painter of Signs thinks that Daisy, in her previous birth, must have been Queen Victoria or in a still earlier incarnation, Rani Jhansi, the warrior queen of Indian history. Like the villagers in the novels of Narayan, Anand and Rao, Markandaya’s villagers also believe in fate. Nathan and Rukmani are firm believers in fate. In the town Nathan fell ill and could not survive it. Before succumbing to illness he tries to console himself saying that a man would never escape his destiny. The thought that he would live in his children gives him some relief.

In the novels we find the faith and belief of the innocent villagers cruelly exploited by some elements. For example, Vasu in The Man-eater of Malgudi, exploits the people’s belief in sacred birds like Garuda, which is believed to be the messenger of God Vishnu. People stop on the road to salute it when it circles in the sky. Keeping in
mind such a belief of the people, he stuffs this bird and sells it at about fifty rupees. Like
the sacred bird, peepal and banyan trees are also considered sacred. It is generally
associated with the divine and that is why people worship them. They are found in the
villages and often stones are put under these sacred trees and people worship them as
gods. Wherever there is a temple or other religious spot, these trees are certainly found.
In *The Guide*, in Mangala village there is a large platform under the *peepal* tree at whose
root a number of stone figures are embedded and often anointed and worshipped.

The villagers are usually vegetarians and they believe that it a sin to eat meat,
especially beef. Jagan, the vendor of sweets is extremely happy when he receives a letter
from his son Mali, who is staying in America. But when he learns that he eats beef, his
whole being shudders with revulsion because the cow is a sacred animal for a Hindu, and
eating beef is prohibited. Similarly, Sriram’s granny does not want to sit on a canvas
chair presented to her by her grandson because she thinks it is made of leather, probably
cowhide, and hence she does not want to pollute herself by sitting on it. We have another
instance of superstition in *Waiting for the Mahatma*. Sriram’s Granny, declared dead by a
doctor, was taken to the funeral pyre. The priest performed all the required rituals for
Granny’s soul to rest in peace and the funeral pyre was lit. But suddenly the big toe of the
left foot of the lady was seen moving. Sriram immediately flung a pail of water on it and
put it out. The toe was wagging. Surely Granny was not dead. She was reviving little by
little. When the doctor suggested that she should be taken back home, the priest
interrupted:

How can you suggest such a thing? No one who has been carried here can ever
step into the town bounds again. Don’t you know it will...the whole town will be
wiped out by fire or plague. It is every inauspicious. Do anything you like, but she
can’t come back into the town. (124)

No one from the assembly had the courage to contradict the priest. It was
shocking to find that the poor lady had to be taken to a small abandoned tollgate station.
After that she went off to Benaras to await her death, to the final fire and to the final
ablution in the sacred Ganges. The same priest in *Waiting for the Mahatma* makes it a
point to see that the ignorant, uneducated village folk would remain superstitious and God fearing, the base on which the entire priesthood in a sense depends. This has been a selfish motive for all these years on the part of the priest — to exploit to his advantage the gullible masses of the society. If at all anybody with a rational approach comes forward, he is very tactfully handled and easily outwitted. On Kanni’s objection to the priest for demanding more coins at the time of rituals the priest softens him by saying:

Our elders have decreed that the Dear Departed should have two silver coins on his or her chest from the hand of the nearest and the dearest. It is said to smooth out the passage of the soul into further regions. I am only repeating what the shastras say. (121)

In some people, beliefs are so deep rooted that it is impossible to remove them. Even when Raju in The Guide makes a clean breast of all that happened to Velan, he refuses to believe that Raju is a fraud. Again, there are some women characters in Narayan like Swami’s grandmother in Swami and Friends, Srinivas’s Granny in Waiting for the Mahatma and Raman’s aunt in The Painter of Signs, who uphold the old values of Hindu life. These women are irrational and superstitious in their outlook and opposed to any change in social conventions.

Beliefs, superstitions and age-old conventions sway the minds of the people of Kanthapura as they do in any other village of India. Adherence to superstition is very evident in the blind beliefs and practices of the labourers of the Skeffington Coffee Estate. When cholera breaks out the labourers are given quinine as a remedy. But they are averse to taking it and instead they hang a little rice and areca nut tied in a cloth piece over the roof of the hut, believing it to be a surer remedy for malaria than the modern medicine.

In Nectar in a Sieve the villagers assert, “Cobras are Sacred” (26) and hence, insist they should not be killed. Probably the belief rose from the fact that cobras were useful to the farmers as they consumed pests like rats, which destroyed the crops. But Nathan, though illiterate, does not believe that. Markandaya clearly disapproves of the
superstitious practices of the rural people. On the failure of rains, Rukmani throws herself on the ground, prays, offers a pumpkin and a few grains of rice to the goddess, but no rains come. The living conditions of the rural people are almost primitive. Nathan’s house is a small thatched mud hut near a paddy field in the vicinity of a couple of similar huts. A garland of mango leaves is hung across its doorway to herald happiness and good fortune. Lack of education and ignorance often breed fear and superstition. Though literate Rukmani also seeks the power of the stone lingam to fight her sterility. In her despair she crosses the social taboo in consulting a foreign male doctor. But then science triumphs, as she begets sons one after another, although she has scarcely any means to feed them.

Bhattacharya also describes the superstitions, beliefs and practices seen in society. To the village folk, the agreement of horoscopes is very important in fixing a marriage. In his Music for Mohini, the faith and trust in horoscopes and the part played by the matchmakers are graphically described. People are so insistent about the matching of horoscopes that some girls may not get married at all. The life of Sudha wins our sympathy, as she remains unmarried owing to the reading in her horoscope that some stars are believed to have been in malefic conjunction as the white shadow of Saturn approaches her stellar lines.

Astrology plays a very important role in Narayan’s novels. It is perhaps due to the fact that Narayan himself suffered a lot because the position of Mars was not suitable in his horoscope for his marriage. According to the belief, Mars in the seventh house of one’s horoscope kills the life-partner provided that the other partner’s horoscope also does not have the same flaw. His wife died a few years after their marriage. Narayan dwells on beliefs, superstitions and rituals in his novels more than any other Indian novelist. A large number of his characters seem to have weird beliefs and appear superstitious to different extents. People in villages and towns have an unshakable belief in horoscopes. No marriage would take place unless the horoscopes agreed completely. The best example of the victim of horoscope is Chandran in The Bachelor of Arts who had an infatuation for Malathii. Chandran is unable to marry the girl whom he loved
because the horoscopes did not agree. When the horoscopes did not agree people believed that God had disposed what man had proposed. When it was found that the horoscopes of Chandran and Malathi did not match, Malathi’s father writes to Chandran’s father:

Since I have great faith in horoscopy, and since I have known from experience that the marriage of couples ill-matched in the stars often leads to misfortune and even tragedy, I have to seek a bride groom elsewhere...no one can have a greater regret at missing an alliance with your family than I. However, we can only propose. He, on the Tirupathi Hills [The Lord Venkatesvara] alone knows what is best for us. (86)

If Chandran is a victim of the faith in horoscope and astrology, Margayya, the financial expert, finds it convenient to bribe the astrologer to recast the horoscopes. Margayya in The Financial Expert wanted his son to marry the daughter of a rich estate owner. But there too the horoscopes did not agree and the astrologer would not settle for any bribe and change his conclusion. But Margayya was not as pious as Malathi’s father. So with the help of Dr. Pal, he found an astrologer who would do whatever they wanted, if they bribed him properly and thus the crisis was resolved. The two types of astrologers that existed in the villages are also portrayed here.

Horoscopes are examined for other purposes too. The priest in The Financial Expert tells Margayya to bring his horoscope in order to prescribe the suitable rituals, performing which he could become wealthy. So also, astrologers are consulted on all important matters, whether it is a marriage, the naming of a child, the opening of a shop, or to know the course of one’s future. Chandran’s marriage with the girl of his parents’ choice is performed on an auspicious date in consultation with an astrologer. The lawyer in The Painter of Signs consults the astrologers regarding the inauguration of his professional career as a lawyer. His astrologer advises him to have the letters of the signboard slanted to the left because he believes that left slant is auspicious for the lawyer’s ruling star.
The villagers are obsessed with omens. In *The Village*, not only Lalu's old mother Gujri, who is foolish enough to believe that it is a good omen to meet a sweeper or a black dog before one begins one's journey, but also the entire village community is in the grip of such superstitious beliefs. Superstition is the religion of feeble minds; it retards progress; it eclipses and spoils the true aspects of religion. Through Lalu, Anand ridicules people who justify superstitions. In *The Village*, when Lalu gets ready to go with his brother and father in search of a loan for his elder brother's marriage, his mother asks them to wait a moment, as she wants to do something auspicious:

"Wait, my son", Gujri cried, "I will go to the well and meet you with a pitcher of water on my head so that your visit may be auspicious". "God suits the burden to the strength", said Lalu cryptically, and headed towards the door. "Wait, wait, my son", Gujri cried out impatiently. But luckily Kesari was just entering with a brass jug full of Ganges water, which was given to devotees at the monastery. "Acha, now you can go." Gujri says. (127)

It is also believed that while starting on a journey if one meets a man bearing a pot of foaming toddy, it is a good omen. Sastrigal in *The Bachelor of Arts* has an experience of such an omen when he is coming to match the horoscope of Chandran and Malathi. But unfortunately his belief deceives him. Malathi's and Chandran's horoscopes do not match. Raman in *The Painter of Signs* regards the number three as a bad omen. He justifies his belief by giving an example of the three witches in *Macbeth*. So, the three women workers who came to meet Daisy are ominous for Raman and his dream of marrying Daisy is shattered. The shopkeeper in *Waiting for the Mahatma* thinks it inauspicious to give back coins on a Friday. The priest in the same novel advises Sriram after his granny's 'temporary' death to put two silver coins on her chest so that it would smooth the passage of the soul into the further regions. Such beliefs have got no rational basis in the modern world and hence they are treated as baseless and intriguing.

Superstitious beliefs are still honoured in India, as every new generation of Indian society submissively adjusts to the older generation and its irrational values and traditions. It is unfortunate that superstition is still an integral part of the general Indian
set up. The risk involved in rebelling against superstition is enormous and so every one in this country dances to the old tune, leaving India a land of incorrigible superstitions. A person like Lalu who has the courage to challenge superstitious practices is treated as an outcast by the society.

The superstitious beliefs in *Two Leaves and a Bud* originate from the ignorance of the common people. A good instance of the ignorance and superstitions that is prevalent among the coolies is, when the women see aeroplanes for the first time and think that there are evil spirits in it. But there are also wise people like Gangu who believe that the class-ridden society is not the making of the Almighty:

God never meant that to happen, for He does not like some persons to have a comfortable living and the others to suffer from dire poverty. He has created land enough to maintain all men, and yet many die of hunger, and most live under a heavy burden of poverty all their lives, as if the earth were made for a few and not for all men! (247-48)

A villager performs a number of rituals in his life. These rituals may be related to birth, marriage, cremation, inauguration, agriculture etc. The trunk of the banana tree, sugarcane stems and the strings of mango leaves are commonly used on auspicious occasions. The mango, the plantain, the *peepal* etc. are the primeval trees. Hence they are of immense significance for the celebration of an auspicious occasion. So also, the beating of the drum and the blowing of the pipe or the *conch* (shell) signify an important auspicious occasion. The following lines from *The Bachelor of Arts* describe the celebration of marriage:

When he [Chandran] reached the Modern Indian Lodge he saw that the entrance or the opposite house was decorated with plantain stems and festoons of mango leaves. These were marks of an auspicious event. Chandran’s body trembled. The drummer, sitting on the *pyol* in front of the house, beat the drum with all the vigour in his arms; the piper was working a crescendo in *Kalayani raga*. (91)
There are certain traditional rituals connected with propitiating the Gods. After reading Margayya’s horoscope the priest prescribes the rituals, the special diet and offerings as laid down in the Shastras. He is to search beyond the banks of the Sarayu outside the town for a ruined temple with a pond beside it, find the red lotus there and then having crushed its petals to a paste, mix it with ghee made from a particular type of cow’s milk and put a dot on his forehead exactly between his eyes, each day after prayers. These are traditional rituals. Cow’s ghee is considered sacred and the red lotus symbolises knowledge. A room in his house has to be swept and rats and cockroaches chased out, cobwebs cleaned away, garnished, strings of mango leaves tied across the doorways and a picture of Lakshmi the four-armed goddess who presides over wealth, distinction and enterprise, placed on a pedestal. He is to sit before the image for some forty days with a certain Sanskrit syllable inscribed on a piece of deer skin tied round his neck, repeating his mantras a thousand times a day.

Among such practices and rituals, caste-system and untouchability get a frequent mention in Narayan’s novels. Srinivas’s wife in Mr.Sampath does not like hotel food. Srinivas knows the reason of her dislikes. It is because of her religious upbringing, the fear of pollution of touch by another caste that she does not want to take hotel food. Only when Srinivas assures her that the food has been brought from a Brahmin hotel, does she consent to eat. So is the case of Savitri in The Dark Room who refuses to eat in the house of Mari and Ponni, the low caste couple. Raju’s mother in The Guide is first sympathetic towards Rosie, but she changes her attitude completely when she learns that Rosie belongs to the group of temple dancers and is a devadasi. It is difficult for Jagan (The Vendor of Sweets) to accept a non-Hindu girl as his daughter-in-law. Raman’s aunt in The Painter of Signs decides to go on a pilgrimage when she learns that Raman is going to marry a Christian girl. It is also equally true that Chandran (The Bachelor of Arts), Mali (The Vendor of Sweets), Raman (The Painter of Signs) and Raju (The Guide) give a jolt to the established customs of the Hindu society.

It is believed that the sacred thread ceremony (Upanayan Samskara) gives a second birth to Brahmins and other ‘twice-borns’ (dwijas). But nowadays its importance
is reduced to merely a string to hang the keys, as does the old man, the landlord of Srinivas, in Mr. Sampath. The other traditional symbol by which a priest or a pundit might be recognised is the tuft that he wears on his head. But nowadays such practices are out-dated. Even Brahmans do not have tufts on their heads because the orthodox caste system is decaying. But in Narayan’s novels whenever a pundit or priest-like character appears, he wears the tuft and sometimes the caste-mark also. The arrogance and hypocrisy of the higher caste people is markedly portrayed by Bhattacharya also. The ritual of milk bath for the idols is not a novel feature introduced by him. But it is prevalent in many temples in India. It is supposed that such donors of milk will have their sins expiated and ‘Punyam’ or merit will accrue to them. Bhattacharya appears to have a sound knowledge of the Indian customs and rites as quoted in the scriptures. In He Who Rides A Tiger, the novelist says:

The chanting of the Name was meant to propel the departing soul skyward. Without that and the complicated ritual, which followed, the departing soul would remain earthbound. The rice and coppers scattered on the street as well as the funeral feasts would earn a goodly measure of merit for the soul of this Brahmin and ensure its warm reception at the portals of heaven. (53)

There seems to be some beliefs, which may fall into the category of folk beliefs connected to folk tales. They appear to be forms of ‘knowledge’ that have their own value in being explanations of the environment in which a folk finds itself. We may not be able to dismiss all of them on the basis of rationality. In A Tiger for Malgudi, we are told that tigers originally had no stripes. The stripes were created later on their skin. The first tiger was like a lion, endowed with a tawny, shining coat of pure gold but he offended some forest spirit, which branded his back with hot coal. Thus were created the black stripes. The coachman in Swami and Friends tells Swaminathan that with the help of some special metal pot and some special herbs, he is able to convert copper coins into silver. He could even convert copper into gold, but it is difficult to find out herbs required for this purpose. Alchemy was a common practice in the Middle Ages. There is a marked difference in the outlooks of Swami and Rajam. Swami is brought up in an orthodox
Hindu family, steeped in superstitions and blind beliefs. He is set in contrast to the character of Rajam, the son of the Superintendent of Police. He rebukes Swami in no uncertain terms when the latter narrates how the coachman cheats him: “We Brahmins deserve that and more,” said Rajam, ‘in our house my father does not care for new-moon days and there are no annual ceremonies for the dead” (109).

In *The Dark Room*, Kamala and Sumati do not dare to look into the cook’s eye because the belief was that a person who looked into the cook’s eye at a certain moment would be turned into stone. They were told that the milestones on the roadside were once human beings who had dared to look into the cook’s eye. In the village society, there exists a lot of strange practices. For example, there is a common practice in the society that if a person utters or listens to a foul word or sees an unpleasant thing, he unconsciously utters the name of Shiva or Narayan or Rama or Krishna to dissolve the sin, which he thinks, he has committed. At the end of the novel *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, people suspect that Natraj was the man who killed Vasu. So, they even hate his press: “That Press! Lord Shiva! An accursed spot! Keep away from it” (236).

The villagers believe in ghosts and evil spirits. It was perhaps their lack of education and ignorance that reinforced their belief in ghosts and other spirits. They believe that cremation grounds and dark places are the abodes of ghosts and evil spirits and they refrain from going near such places at night. Stories are always afloat in the villages of someone or other having seen ghosts and evil spirits. They imagined that there was a regular ghost world in the villages at night. Besides ghosts, the village goddess was also imagined to be moving along the village streets at night. There was a time when ghosts, devils, evil spirits and evil eyes had the sanction of the society; but in modern times, as scientific awareness has grown, these are treated as hallucinations and mere superstitions. Although, in modern India, there are not many people who believe in ghosts, devils and spirits, the India in which Narayan was brought up was rampant with such beliefs. Supernatural beings figure mostly in the early novels of Narayan. In his first novel *Swami and Friends*, Swami has an experience of the devil at the ghostly hours of the night, when he was caught near the forest after running away from his school. When
the night fell suddenly, different shapes started to appear like ghosts in the darkness of
the night and Swami was terrified. Similarly, in *The Dark Room*, Mari, when he returns
from one of his nocturnal visits, sees an apparition, whom he thinks, is Mohini, the
Temptress Devil, who waylaid lonely wayfarers and sucked their blood. He watches it
with fascination and horror. But on closer examination it turns out to be a woman-Savitri-
who was trying to commit suicide. Again in Narayan, at the beginning of *The Financial
Expert*, the night watchman notices that the ghost of the famous Registrar of the co-
operative society, who had spent all his money in the construction of the co-operative
bank, has been watching everything going on in the bank in a sad mood from within a
teak frame suspended on the central landing:

He was said to be responsible for occasional poltergeist phenomena, the rattling
of paperweights, flying ledgers, and sounds like the brisk opening of folios, the
banging of fists on a table, and so on evidenced by successive night watchmen.
This could be easily understood, for the ghost of the Registrar had many reasons
to feel sad and frustrated. (1)

In *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, people believe that dogs bark at night because
ghosts are visible to them. But neither Natraj nor Vasu has seen a ghost. In *A Tiger for
Malgudi*, the villagers believe that the devil takes away animals; they are even prepared
to perform propitiatory ceremonies in their village. But the fact was that the man-eater
was reducing the number of their cattle. The stories, which are told about ghosts and
demons, gods and goddesses, hell and heaven, have a great bearing upon the tender mind
of a child. William Walsh rightly observes: “Our minds are trained to accept without
surprise characters of godly or demoniac proportion with actions and reactions set in
limitless worlds progressing through an incalculable time-scale” (1983:16).

Ramteke speaks about the gullibility of the Indians:

Fear plays an important role in the life of a Hindu. He is afraid of ghosts, demons
and gods. The fear has made the Hindu mentally weak, and incapable of pursuing
an independent line of thinking with courage and determination, since it has been
artificially created by brainwashing from childhood. As a result, he simply does not have the courage to verify the truth. He accepts the things as they are, simply because it are written in the so-called holy shastras or because some saints or yogis have been reported to have said so. (1998:91)

It was believed that if one came into contact with ghosts or evil spirits they would enter the body of that person and would possess him. In order to free the victim from the influence of the ghost or evil spirit, the services of the priests or holy men specialised in exorcising ghosts were made use of. Though, in the Indian society, exorcism was common, it had only a psychological effect. In The English Teacher when Susila fell sick, which ultimately caused her death, her mother was convinced that the Evil Eye had fallen on her. She was definite that if Susila had not been allowed to go into the lavatory, she would not have fallen sick. She invited a man to exorcise the effect of the Evil Eye. He uttered some mantras with closed eyes, took a pinch of sacred ash and rubbed it on her forehead, and tied to her arm a talisman strung in yellow thread. When Swamiji left, he uttered, “May God help you to see the end of your anxieties” (93). The end of the anxieties was not the recovery of the patient from her illness but the end of her life itself. Similarly, in Mr. Sampath, Ravi’s mother calls a group of men to exorcise her son’s madness:

In front of him were set out trays of Saffron and flowers, huge twigs of margosa leaves and a camphor flare. A wild looking man with huge beads around his neck, clad in red-silk, his forehead dabbed with vermilion, officiated at the ceremony. He looked very much like Shiva in make-up. The air choked with incense burning in a holder. (204)

Even from their infancy, children were told stories of heaven and hell and people became engrossed with the idea. It was believed that the wicked would go to hell, which was a place of torture, and the good to heaven, which was a paradise where God and angels were. The human mind created heaven and hell because it was essential for establishing order in society. Such concepts helped people in refraining from acts, which
were not morally sanctioned by the society. In Swami and Friends, Rajam gives a hair-raising account of the torture in hell if one fosters enmity among friends:

According to Rajam, it was written in the Vedas that a person who fostered enmity should be locked up in a small room, after his death. He would be made to stand, stark naked, on a pedestal of red-hot iron. There were beehives all around with bees as big as lemons. If the sinner stepped down from the pedestal, he would have to put his foot on immense scorpions and centipedes that crawled about in the room in hundreds — (A shudder went though the company). The sinner would have to stand thus for a month, without food or sleep. At the end of a month he would be transferred to another place, a very narrow bridge over a lake of boiling oil. The bridge was so narrow that he would be able to keep only one foot on it at a time. Even on the narrow bridge there were plenty of wasp nests and cactus, and he would be goaded from behind to move on. He would have to balance on one foot, and then on another, for ages and ages, to keep himself from falling into a steaming lake below, and move on indefinitely. (46)

Because of their strong belief in ghosts and spirits, people ascribed many types of diseases particularly of children to the actions of evil spirits. The people of the villages believe that diseases like small pox, cholera and malaria are caused by goddesses and evil sprits. The goddesses were to be propitiated to cure persons affected by the diseases and to prevent the diseases from spreading. For this they used the services of ordinary tantriks. The spread of schools and colleges, market centres, various means of communications, various political and social activities, rural electrification and the launch of industrial units, small or big, have facilitated the frequent movement of people to different places. The beliefs in ghosts and spirits among adults and the spread of ghost stories among children have been greatly reduced in modern times. The old environment is changing and young people are beginning to question beliefs and practices for which there are no evident reasons.

In Narayan's Malgudi we find that such things like castes, beliefs, practices and astrology are still respected, but not always obeyed. Malgudi has an oral history that goes
back to epic times. The people believe that Rama would have passed that way, on his way to Sri Lanka and his lotus feet would have touched the path of Malgudi. The town's past is involved with the past of India, it is a land crossed and re-crossed by legendary and historical personages such as Rama, Sita, other gods and goddesses, rakshasas and asuras, apsaras, gurus and sadhus. Many of Narayan's novels have got a mythic structure. Myths are used to explain various things. Rogerson dwells on the use of myth:

Myth also attempts to explain things. The things so explained can be many and various, including the origin, nature and functioning of the world, the origin of social organisation, social habits and customs, religious beliefs and practices. (1974: 175)

*The Man-eater of Malgudi* follows an obvious mythic pattern: the conflict of Good and Evil, which essentially results in the initial suffering of the good and the final destruction of the evil. The idea of mythical demon is used in *The Man-eater of Malgudi*. Vasu, the modern Bhasmasura, is presented as the rakshasa fairly early in the novel. It can be said that belief is the very foundation of myth and in due course of time it gives rise to superstition when people do not understand the underlying philosophy behind certain customs and practices.

Many characters of Narayan are in a dilemma. On the one hand, they find it difficult to fully forego age-old beliefs, but on the other hand, they are unable to get along with it too. For example, in *The Bachelor of Arts*, Chandran renounces the earthly world out of sheer reluctance to its irrational and ridiculous nature of social customs, but finally returns to his family, marries in the same old traditional way and settles down in life. Again, In *The Dark Room*, Savitri's high caste creates a deeply psychological barrier between herself and Mari and Ponni of the lower caste, who rescue her from drowning. She too in her attempt to assert her individuality leaves her husband, though in the end she has no other alternative left but to accept defeat in life. She returns home to her unrepentant husband. Though the characters make certain attempts to go against the prevailing social customs and traditions, they simply cannot shake them off. They cannot
stand the collective force of the society as a whole. The result is, they accept defeat, remorse follows, and they find happiness in submission.

In Anand’s novels, one finds quite a number of very interesting beliefs and superstitions in vogue among the villagers. For example, in the novel *Gauri*, the husband suspects that the difficulties in his life are due to the ill luck that his wife has brought with her. Gauri and her husband are thrown out of their ancestral home following a family feud and they fail to make a home of their own on account of a terrible famine that breaks out in the village. Kesaro’s secret attachment to Panchi causes hatred in her against Gauri. So she cunningly calls the famine, drought and poverty that have accompanied Panchi’s marriage, as God’s curse for his marrying the unlucky woman, Gauri. The poor Panchi believes Kesaro:

The idea of Gauri’s bad stars continued to possess him, because the circumstances which were said to have been created by her arrival continued to grow worse: the drought seemed to become permanent; the rains would not come; more birds were found dead with the heat in the field; the wells were drying up completely; and cattle was dwindling through the owners taking their cows, buffaloes and bullocks away to villages further down the valley towards Hoshiarpur town to sell them to the slaughter house. (97-98)

Thus superstition victimises Gauri. Panchi who is at the beginning proud of Gauri’s comely and innocent appearance and her ‘cow-like meekness’, forms a completely different picture of her under the influence of the superstition planted in him by Kesaro. He says: “She has ruined me. My aunt Kesaro is right when she says that this bride is the incarnation of Kali, the black goddess who destroys all before her, who brings famine in her breath and lays bare whole villages” (33). Here, Anand tells us how superstitions influence the ignorant villagers. They are so innocent and gullible that they believe anything without thinking about the rationale behind it. Anand’s usual protest against the belief in *karma* also is voiced in this novel. The villagers accept all their misfortunes as part of their *karma*. But Panchi, as in the case of all other Anand protagonists, does not believe in *karma*. His explanation of *karma* as a euphemism for
exploitation reflects the author's own mind. Gauri like all village women believes in karma. But the education she has received by coming into contact with the enlightened Dr. Mahindra makes her realise the foolishness of believing in it. "'Education', Gauri said quoting the big Daktar, 'education will make us master fate'" (240). Thus Anand makes us realise the importance of education in eradicating the social evils that torment the village society. The villagers are blinded by superstition and they mistake superstition for religion. To such people, Kesaro's telling them that from the day Gauri set foot in their house, they have had bad luck, is bound to sound sensible. When she returns home with the hope of getting affection and happiness, again superstition drags her to greater misery. Her uncle, Amru, bluntly tells Laxmi about her: "Her husband has turned her out. This unlucky girl must have brought him troubles, as she brought difficulties to us" (107). This also shows how quickly people become prey to superstitious beliefs. Amru, affected by superstition thinks that misfortune will overtake them, because of Gauri's stay there. Accusing Gauri as inauspicious, simply shows how superstition has deprived people of their senses. It is deplorable that the villagers, instead of fighting against superstition, indirectly work for the strengthening of it by following many meaningless rituals involving a lot of their hard earned money. On the other hand, in Anand's trilogy we find the people taking a strong stand against superstition. When the human suffering has reached unprecedented heights and the stage is all set for a revolution, the peasants do not take their suffering as their kismet but get ready to organise themselves into groups in order to oppose the unjust government. Again, what was a necessity yesterday need not be so today. But people still stick on to the necessities of the past even though they have become unnecessary today. Young Lalu in The Village is able to see these things in their correct perspective.

As Lalu is fully aware that these are obsolete conventions, when he goes to the town, he enters the shop of a Muhammadan, who is considered as a low caste, and from where a palatable smell is spreading. He orders an earthen saucer of curry and satisfies his hunger. Then unaware of the sacrilege he is committing, he enters "King George V Haircutting and Shaving Saloon" and has his hair shorn. In the eyes of the Sikh community this is a great sacrilege but Lalu becomes aware of it only when he reaches
the village and the priest and others pounce upon him for his disrespect to the religious conventions.

As already seen, some people even went to the extent of considering Gandhi as an incarnation of different Gods. Bakha, in *Untouchable*, remembers how people say that no sword could cut the Mahatma’s body, no bullet could pierce his skin, and no fire could scorch him. Bakha hears a ‘rustic’ ask a ‘Babu’ if Gandhi will be able to overthrow the government. His reply is, “He has the *shakti* [power] to change the whole world. The British Government is nothing” (116). And Bakha does not disbelieve what he has heard!

In *Anand*, we find a number of beliefs connected with the untouchables. For example, the belief that something, which an untouchable had touched, would pollute one of higher caste was so strong that the higher caste people accepted things given by the untouchable only after ‘purifying’ it. When Bakha buys some *jelebis*, he being an untouchable, to avoid pollution by touch, the confectioner throws the packet of *jelebis*, like a cricket ball, for the untouchable to catch. Bakha then places four-nickel coins on a shoe-board near which the confectioner’s assistant has been standing, ready with some water to sprinkle and remove the pollution. But, at the same time, a high caste man who hates even going near an untouchable is so happy to touch a foul smelling bull and pay respects to the dirty animal. Bakha saw:

A huge, big-humped, small-horned, spotted old brahminee bull was ruminating with half closed eyes near him. The stink from its mouth as it belched strangely unlike any odour, which had assaulted Bakha’s nostrils that day, was nauseating. And the liquid dung which the bull had excreted and which Bakha knew it was his duty to sweep off, sickened him. But presently he saw a well-dressed, wrinkled old Hindu, wearing like a rich man, a muslin scarf over his left shoulder, advance to the place where the bull was enjoying its siesta and touch the animal with his forefingers. (60)

Thus *Anand* opens our eyes and makes us see clearly how wicked a practice untouchability is. A low caste human being is believed to be lower than a dirty bull.
Immediately Bakha realises the wickedness of the society in which he is placed; which considers touching a human being like him as a malediction and touching a dirty bull like the one he has seen just then as a benediction. Anand is vehemently opposed to the worn out customs and traditions. A close reading of the novels of Anand will reveal a lot of interesting beliefs and superstitions that exist in the village society, and then one becomes shockingly aware of the depth to which these practices have penetrated in the village community.

Thus the Indian villager of the first half of the twentieth century was a bundle of strange beliefs and customs. Although he had his own strong reasons for holding on to his beliefs, which he guarded as sacred relics, his modern and sophisticated counterpart of the twenty-first century, who stands in the floodlight of scientific discoveries and advancements may daub them as mere superstitions. But to the villager of the past his beliefs were the pivot of his life on which everything moved. Many of his beliefs might have been superstitions in the eyes of the modern world. But there is only a thin veil that separates the two. He had arrived at this system of beliefs in the course of many decades and through many generations and many of these beliefs were time tested. The rituals, which accompanied these sets of beliefs, lend colour and vitality to the otherwise monotonous and pallid life of the villager. Hence, the villager found joy in the age-old belief systems that existed in the village and he held them fast and close to his heart.