Chapter V

Nation versus Conversion: *Kanthapura, God of Small Things*

He is mixing with the Pariahs as a veritable Mohammedan, and the Swami has sent word through Bhatta to say that the whole of Kanthapura will be excommunicated [...] he can go sleep with these Pariah whores [...] but let him not call himself a Brahman.

(*Kanthapura* 57-58)

They had jumped from the frying pan into the fire. They were made to have separate churches, with separate services and separate priests. As a special favor they were even given their own separate pariah Bishop [...] it was a little like having to sweep away your footprints without a broom. Or worse, not being *allowed* to leave footprints at all.

(*God of Small Things* 74)

The blurb of *Kanthapura* proudly presents itself as a fictional rendering of the struggle for independence and of the way “the movement became a tangible reality in rural India.”\textsuperscript{1} This in itself could easily be
identified as a homogenizing nationalist project, carrying the hidden agenda of the nationalist power elite of the Hindi – Hindu – Hindustani – Delhi type, described as “Hinduism/Brahmanism as Delhi rule” by Gail Omvedt. The meta-narrative of nationalism, the freedom struggle led by the Congress party and its caste Hindu leadership, specifically its Brahmanic heads, have always been puzzled by the pluralistic and multilateral nature of the subaltern, peasant and low caste movements that problematized the so called monolithic, anti-colonial liberation struggle of India. It was also as an outcome of the political expediency of the hegemonic lords soon after independence to legitimize, narrativize, textualize, disseminate and manufacture consent and pedagogic consensus among the rural masses that nationalism and anti-colonial solidarity emerged as the only “true, patriotic and ethical” ideology and praxis. The nationalist elite also wanted to assert that patriotic cultural nationalism is the legacy of the martyrs and the republic; and those who questioned nationalism and its homogeneous discourse could only be termed as traitors of the motherland. In this hegemonic perspective the people who experienced the most degrading slavery in human history for thousands of years under the internal imperialism of Hindu/Brahmanic colonialism, and their liberation movements under the leadership of thinkers like Phule, Narayana Guru and Periyor become anti-nationalist and communitarian. This is the discursive context in which nationalist narrative texts like Kanthapura, that attained
instant canonical stature as a Gandhian novel and as the first artful appropriation of the English language by an “Indian” writer become significant.\(^5\)

The nationalist project of using the creative imagination to engender a national psyche and liberal subjecthood is signified by the iconic status of Gandhi.\(^6\) The Gandhian ideology and its peculiar way of evading the caste question through its patronizing double speak of *Harijanodharana* has been exposed in Gandhi’s own time by the historic critique of Ambedkar.\(^7\) The Gandhian ideology wants to resolve the issue of caste and hierarchy but at the same time it wants to retain the upper hand and agency for the Savarna population, who are expected to redeem the “Harijans.” That is why Dalit Bahujans rejected it as paternalistic, elitist and non-egalitarian. *Kanthapura* articulates these concerns as well as the struggles and strifes of the split nationalist worldview that is complex in many ways.

It is the story of young Moorthy, an educated and idealist Gandhian Brahman of Kanthapura, a small hilly hamlet in the Western Ghats, and his attempts to disseminate the ideology of Gandhian Swaraj in the caste-ridden conservative Brahmanic society.\(^8\) It is the typical enactment of the *Harijanodharana* project of Gandhian *Gramswaraj*.\(^9\) The split psyche and the contradicting subject position of the nationalist Brahmanic elite engaged in this great redeeming task are explicit not just in the plot, but at the level of the narrative structure and voice. While the “great act of self sacrifice,” of
discarding the age-old Brahmanic elitist legacy of purity and pollution, is personified in the character of Moorthy, young, rebellious and forward looking, the textualization and narration of this complicit and precarious social transformation is recorded and rendered through the “mature” voice of an old Brahmanic female subject who lends the weight of hegemonic and hierarchical worldview to the process. Young Moorthy becomes the spirit of masculine reformism and the old feminine narrative voice stands for the domesticated hegemonic tradition and its hierarchical goals. The conflict between the young, radical and subversive, and the old, complicit and hegemonic is explicit in this central problematic of the narrative text.

Another narrative trope that articulates this tension is that of the old rural naïve communes, the prototype of Gramswaraj, the autonomous and self-sufficient village neighborhoods demarcated with occupational caste tags. The narrative deliberately develops a discourse of rural naïveté to whitewash and subdue the material conflicts and the inhuman suppression of caste and gender issues from within the boundary of this Brahmanic caste-swaraj village. This is a discourse of “ruralism” comparable to the discourses of “primitivism” and “orientalism” that too served the purposes of power and hegemony through material conquests and holocausts. This ruralism discourse should again be contextualized and epistemologically elaborated by placing it in the environment of the Gandhian ideology of Brahmanic patriarchy perpetrated in the name of Gramswaraj and Harijanodharana.
The ruralism discourse also provides parallels with the tribalism discourse identifiable in the texts dealing with the Adivasi question like *Mavelimantam* (see the fourth chapter).

In the foreword to the novel, Rao himself asserts that “there is no village in India, however mean, that has not a Sthalapurana, or legendary history of its own.” See the homogenizing and authoritarian voice with which he sums up the plurality of India, which could only be termed as Brahmanic/hegemonic. He himself relates and places his project in the tradition of myth-making that allowed Brahmanism to imagine and name the subcontinent and its territories, and thus played a key role in establishing its narrative monopoly over the Bahujan masses over thousands of years (see the discussion of “Parasuram Padalli,” the village of *Gramayana* in the third Chapter). These hegemonic myths associate each and every bit of land to a Brahmanic saint or a subservient Kshatriya ruler like Rama who would ensure the supremacy and protection of the Brahman and the cow, thereby establishing a twice-born monopoly over the land and the material culture. By invoking the name of Rama, the legendary Aryan god who destroyed the Southern civilizations through cheat and opportunistic alliances and ensured the perpetuation and sustenance of Aryan–Brahman hegemony throughout the peninsula, and linking it with each and every village of the newly imagined nation, and also bringing in and associating the name of the Mahatma to it, Rao makes his message explicit. But one might ask what, or
who gives him the authority and agency to speak for the people in an all-encompassing way invoking an Aryan ruler, and what is the legitimacy of his sovereign subject position as "we" and "ours."

Raja Rao also effects another important erasure and transcendence here. "We are all instinctively bilingual," he adds in the foreword. In order to defend his choice of the English language and his self-assumed spokesman-ship, he simply mocks at people who were always outside the power play of hegemonic colonial languages, whether it is Sanskrit or English, which were never spoken by the people at any given time. By invoking the legacy of *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* and his own hybrid tongue of sophistication he also foregrounds these two hegemonic languages and the cultures that they represent. The "we" discourse that implies that the people of India are historically equal and are the homogeneous heirs to the hegemonic meta-narratives of the epics and the elitist canon again places the author at the centre of the nationalist project.

In the narrative "we" assumes voice in a mediated and patronizing way. It is the nationalist tastes and standards that are the ideals of the village conscience, and it is expressed through the discourse of "we" that voices the concerns of the Brahmanic value system. The monopolizing and policing collective consciousness informs and signifies its scopes and limits, the omnipresent and potent nationalist voice closely doctoring it:
We never liked him (Dore). He had always been such a braggart. He was not like corner house Moorthy, who had gone through life like a noble cow, quiet, generous, serene, deferent and Brahmanic, a very prince, I tell you. We loved him, of course as you will see, and if only I had not been a daughterless widow, I should have offered him a grand daughter, if I had one. And I know he would have said: ‘Achakka, you are of the Vedasastra Pravina Krishna Sastri’s family, and is it greater for you to ask something of me, or me to answer ‘yea.’” (12)

Thus Rao’s text confirms that Brahmanism is an ideology, serene and deferent, a princely one, unlike the un-Brahmanic or anti-Brahmanic ideology of the likes of Dore, perhaps an abominable individual like Naranappa in Samskara. Being princely Brahmanic therefore matters, since power matters.

Even in the spatial narrativization of the village one could see the Chathurvarnya structure that begins from the Brahman head and ends in the Shudra limbs. The caste-swaraj village is presented as an archetypal Utopia by the old feminine narrative voice. The Brahman quarter is mentioned and held at the top of the things in relation to space and social topography. The gradation and demarcation of material space and social life is narrated as something normal and eternal. The narrative chokes in repeated references in
a secondary way to the Pariah quarter and the other untouchable quarters, which are the sole working quarters of this evil organism called the caste-swaraj village. Thus Brahman occupies the centre of space and time and the centre of reference of all the sign systems here. That is why the narrative voice is not even sure about the existence of the Pariah quarter with its countless huts (12), since the margins no longer exist in its cosmology and epistemology, it is an erased and constantly cursed presence, an imagined mirage.

Even the folk songs and popular entertainment of the Harikatha kind connect the freedom struggle with the Sanskrit meta-narratives of Aryan gods and goddesses, from the epics and Puranas, thereby ensuring the perpetuation of hegemony. They become elitist propaganda in disguise, a consent-manufacturing masquerade that proves to be of influence among the illiterate masses, among the Bahujans and women in particular. See the cross-reference and inter-textual invocations in the Harikatha:

‘Today’ he says ‘it will be the story of Siva and Parvati.’

And Parvati in penance becomes the country and Siva becomes heaven knows what! Siva is the three eyed, he says and ‘Swaraj too is three eyed: self purification, Hindu-Muslim unity, Khaddar. And then he talks of Damayanti and Sakuntala and Yasoda and everywhere there is something about our country and something about Swaraj. Never had
we heard Harikatha like this, and he can sing too, can Jayaramachar. He can rapt us in tears for hours together. But the Harikatha he did which I can never forget in this life and in all lives to come is about the birth of Gandhiji [...] the old woman came along [...] she could never stay away from a Harikatha. And sitting beside us, how she wept! (20)

Note how the hagiographies of the ancient and contemporary Brahmanic deities intercross and mutually contribute to the perpetuation of hegemony. The mythical and discursive contexts and paradigms from which the makers of neo nationalism draw their metaphors are revealed here. Damayanti and Sakuntala are typical feminine constructs who are subservient to Brahmanic patriarchy. That is why they are idealized cult figures in the modern Brahmanic imagiNation. The image of such "noble" women runs deep in the sacred symbology of the nation, which is to be protected from the invading and alien threats of the other. The vampires of patriotism and nationalism feed on the carcasses of these gendered subjects whose mind and body the masters literally govern. By invoking and inter-textually signifying the model women, model gods and godly men from the present, Brahmanic patriarchy inscribes its name over the new imagiNation. It is a way of monopolizing and appropriating the new nation, its past, present and future, that must be imagined and textualized. It is to be materialized through the
mobilization of the Bahujan masses, without whose support the high priests of purity would remain lifelong servants to their ‘flesh eating’ white lords.

Even the might and administrative power of the colonial white regime could not penetrate the heart of Brahmanic darkness covering the sanctum sanctorum of caste-swaraj villages, since the colonial regime did not want to disturb the society’s power equations. The police inspector Bade Khan could not find a place within the Kantapura village since he is a Muslim and therefore a “mlecha” in the Brahmanic view. He settles outside the margins in an estate hut, but does not forget to ensure the custody of a poor Pariah woman as a sex slave. Both in the centre and in the periphery the gendered subject, especially the subaltern one, is at the receiving end. According to the narrative, the inspector is always eager to give the woman a “warmful bed” (27).

If these are aspects of cultural monopoly, in Bhatta, the village moneylender we have a typical embodiment of the aspects of economic monopoly. Bhatta is a slice of the Brahmin-Baniya money lending legacy that ensured economic development and monopoly for the noble lords who detested manual labor and material work as the Top Twice Born.11 “Bhatta became richer and richer. He could lend out more money. And now he was no more a pontifical Brahmin. He was a land-owner… pariahs and plantation coolies were at the door” (38). Yet the narrative voice holds him in high esteem in comparison to the Chetties, the real tradesmen and therefore the
real Vaisyas in the Brahmanic Varna system. In the hierarchical worldview of the female voice belonging to the gendered Brahmanical subject, they could be nothing more than the Padajas, or the most detested Shudras; "He (Bhatta) was so smiling and so good. Never had he charged us more interest than Subba Chetty or Rama Chetty. These two brothers were the ruin of our village (40)." Thus the curse is not for the acts and deeds but for the caste, since both persons do the same work. The pro-Brahmanic caste position and imagined subservient purity of Bhatta as a Vaisya with 'a second metaphysical birth and a sacred thread' is again stressed and projected in the general public (here Brahmanic) opinion of the village elders, who condemn his uplifting attempts of the Pariahs in the name of nationalism. Even the Brahmanical saints and high priests, canonized as Sankaracharyas and Swamis and as supreme spokesmen of Hinduism, want this subaltern uprising to be crushed in its seed:

'The Swami is worried over this Pariah movement and he wants to crush it in its seed, before its cactus roots have spread far and wide. You are a Bhatta and your voice is not a sparrow voice in your village, and you should speak to your people and organize a Brahman party. Otherwise Brahmanism is as good as kitchen ashes. The Mahatma is a good man and a simple man. But he is making too much of these carcass eating Pariahs. Today it is the Pariahs,
tomorrow it will be the Mohammedans, and the day after the Europeans [...] we must stop this. The Swami says he will outcaste every Brahmin who has touched a Pariah. That is the right way to begin. Bhattare, we need your help.' (44-5)

So they want to keep the nationalist discourse and its greater legacy as an exclusive Brahman-Bania/Top Twice born/Savarna affair. From the beginning itself Brahmanic patriarchy is aware of the threat of the Dalit Bahujan appraisal and want to abort it in the womb itself, as female foetuses are aborted by patriarchy in contemporary India. The Brahmanic image of the Muslims and the Europeans along with that of Dalits and Bahujans as carcass-eaters and degraded aliens is also to be taken note of here. What is under threat in confronting all these others is always caste and the Varna Dharma metaphysics surrounding it, for the Swami says, “he will outcaste every Brahman who has touched a Pariah.” And they are also sure that “this Bhatta who is a pontifical Brahman cannot be on the side of the Pariahs” (45). The second Brahman also rises to the occasion as expected by his earthly lords, the real first ones, and asserts; “I see no fault in Khadi and all that. But it is this Pariah business that has been heavy on my soul…” (46).

Though they could tame the rural Bhatta who is just a pontifical, would-be Brahman, they are not that sure about Moorthy and his city talk. They fear English and Western education. But one good old lady assures them: “Moorthy was such a deep-voiced, God loving person, and would do
no mixing of castes” (51). See the masculine and caste-centred ideology of Brahmanic patriarchy speaking through one of its aged female subjects, for her Moorthy’s deep-voiced manhood and expected/desired exclusivist assertion of caste hierarchy are promising. At least for her he is not an enemy of the age old power structure and a usurper of hegemony. But soon they find out that he is an enemy of the system: “he is mixing with the Pariahs as a veritable Mohammedan, and the Swami has sent word through Bhatta to say that the whole of Kanthapura will be excommunicated... he can go sleep with these Pariah whores... but let him not call himself a Brahman” (57-8). Again note the evil image and curse connected to the Muslims. In Brahmanical imagination that is the most degraded of states, without caste, hierarchy and ‘culture.’ It is a constant threat of pollution and otherness. The other is a constant threat of subversion and the loss of hegemony.

In receiving curses only the Pariah could surpass the Muslim. Not just the name of the low caste, even their shadow is polluting. In the God of Small Things, we have a reference to Dalits as dark shadowy creatures, not recognized as human beings and who are not allowed to leave their footmarks or shadows behind. They are violently denied their historical shares and basic human rights and assets. See how cunningly Indian Brahmanic nationalism tries to get rid of their shadows, even from the discourse of the domestic register. When Moorthy returns home after his
Harjanodharana work, 'a great act of selfless redeeming' and patronizing, his mother welcomes him with this age-old curse, and threatens him on caste lines: "Don't talk like an innocent. Go and stand on the steps like a Pariah. Let not your shadow fall on me - enough of it" (62). The Pariah can even pollute the Brahman household and food through mere talking, via air: "Can't you shut your mouth, you Pariah! ... You always want to pollute the food of Brahmins with your evil tongues" (85).

Even when the honour of women is in question, caste honour sanctifies and legitimizes violence done on that ground and gains priority. The Brahman clerk's declaration defending his daughter from the Sahib is that "I am a Brahman, I would rather die than sell my daughter" (83). The narrative generously adds that after this the master hesitated to force even low caste women: "And when a Pariah says no, he hardly sends the Maistri to drag her up at night" (83). Thus the reader may conclude that the honour of women too is hierarchized according to the sacred Brahmanical Varna Dharma and that chastity and purity are more or less Brahmanic privileges and monopolies. The slave woman could not even imagine an autonomous human individual subject position. It was 'so natural and normal' that she could be dragged out of her ghetto and raped at the caste lord's convenience.

But the hard and fast rules of purity and pollution also change on certain occasions, especially when there is an urgent need for human power and resources. The ex-feudal Brahmanic caste lords otherwise keen on
erasing the subaltern imprints of history have no problem in mobilizing the muzzle power of the untouchable Pariahs when it suits their interests. The untouchable masses form the backbone of all nationalist struggles and campaigns. The subaltern is cheated by the brief spell of egalitarianism and camaraderie, and they break their backs and limbs to defend the lords and their nationalist cause. Such opportunistic tactics are employed by the Savarna/Brahmanic leadership of all major political parties in India.

Unfortunately, as illustrated by the God of Small Things and as economists like Amartya Sen have pointed out, the Left still maintains its historic avoidance of the caste question in its analysis of the Indian society. And even after the collapse of the rhetoric of “the class struggle” in contemporary post-Mandal politics they have subverted the constitutional protection to the Bahujan backward communities by diluting the social justice foundation of affirmative action with their veiled neo rightist “economic justice” metaphysics. Reservations were never constitutionally intended for economic uplift or levelling but for social and educational backwardness. Social justice was its primary concern, not economic uplift. So we see the Left working in tandem with the Savarna upper caste organizations and asking the democratically elected government in Kerala not to implement the social justice policies and constitutional liabilities in the wake of the debate initiated by the Narendran Commission Report that came up for discussion in 2005, on the question of recruitment to the public service. The erasure of
historical inequalities, characteristic of the ex-caste lords in the nationalist elitist tradition articulated here should also be seen in this hegemonic contexts and general pattern of diplomatic policy shifts, that have engineered society and its economy.

So it is the Pariahs who receive the blows here and also it is their quarter of the village that gets destroyed in the agitations (121). Towards the end of the struggle they are getting out of the picture altogether (122-3). It is significant that the Brahman quarter stood untouched by the violence and calamity of the nationalist struggle. The colonial police men consisting mainly of caste Hindus use the upsurge to reiterate caste hegemony by using violence on the Pariah women, who are raped brutally on caste lines, anticipating the final solutions in Gujarat:13 “The yell of the Pariah women still comes rolling across [...] a police man upon her [...] from the Pariah street we hear nothing but shouts and lamentations [...] the shrieks of Pariah women are still shrill in the air”(213). The participation and mobilization of women in the nationalist movement is a problematic issue in the light of new insights on gender violence and related cultural questions. It is a lot more complex issue than the mobilization of their men, whose work force and labour resources are cheaply exploited by the Brahmanic upper caste leadership.

Moorthy who is presented as a selfless Gandhian and a representative of the nationalist Brahmanic elite, asks the fellow nationalists to put aside the
purity and pollution of caste for awhile till the white lords are pushed out of the country. He appeals to them not to get rid of caste considerations as such, but only to keep it aside for the time being: "The congress men have to swear again to speak truth [...] and put aside the idea of the holy Brahmin and the untouchable Pariah" (170). This opportunistic discourse ensured the material participation and concentration of the resources of the Bahujans in the movement and constructed a conjectural consensus of pseudo-equality and a sense of community among the nationalists and participants of the anti-colonial struggle, as has been narrated in the text.

This double speak discourse of nationalism draws liberally on the symbology of Hindu images and icons in order to perpetuate itself and to extend its boundaries of hegemony across the various regional areas of the country for laying the foundations of a Brahmanic Hindu Rashtra, through its poetry, painting, performance and even Bhajans themselves. From the Gita to the conch, from the spinning wheel to the Rama Rajya, the defense of Varna Dharma by Gandhi himself - every thing is predestined to be Brahmanic and hegemonic. See how these hegemonic icons are perpetuated and legitimized among the people and used to lure the Bahujans into the fold: "...blew the conch and the people came - men, women, children and the Pariah and the weavers and the potters and all seemed to feel they were of one caste, one breath" (179). The victims themselves become the Kar Sevaks of internal imperialism to fight an external enemy.
The narrative voice itself is suggestive of the divided world and worldviews. The world of the Brahmanic upper castes and that of the Dalit Bahujan never merge in the narrative discourse. The narrative voice is split between the “we” and the “Pariah.” In situations of crisis the Pariah are also incorporated into the “we” domain conjecturally and conditionally but the moment the task is achieved they are out in the margins of the narrative and the narrated reality. This again brings us to the ambiguity in the position of the Brahmanic nationalist elite and his complicit hegemonic imagination vis-a-vis the nation. His fascist, genocidal hate of the other and his liberal uplifting agency and nationalist subject position are seen to legitimate his centrality in relation to the marginality of the historic victims. As a consequence of this status quoist concern the narrative concludes only after ensuring the restoration and legitimization of hegemony and the establishment of Top Twice Born dynasties in the independent Hindi-Hindu-Hindustani-Delhi heartland. The narrative fails miserably in its set goals of making the freedom struggle a rural reality. Instead it exposes the ambiguities and double speak that the nationalist upper caste subjects practice for the reestablishment of hegemony. The narration of the Brahmanic legacy of the nationalist movement thus becomes a self-defeating task as its pedagogic objectives unveil its hegemonic history.

What is explicit here is the association between Brahmanism, caste imperialism and nationalist aspirations. For thousands of years, at least from
the time of the Buddha religious conversion has been the single material solution to escape the wrath of internal caste-Varna empire and its divide-and-rule strategy. Later other alternative religions like Christianity, Islam and Sikhism lured the Bahujans with redeeming hope and egalitarian dignity. But the cursed history of the people in the peninsula remained the same as the invisible Brahmanic ideology of purity and pollution and its cultural elitism crept in through the backdoor to all the alternative religious paradigms in its unique form of disguise called caste. Even minority religions have become casteist and we have in present-day India problems concerning the Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims.

In “Visions, Illusions and Dilemmas of Dalit Christians in India” Lancy Lobo deals with the Christian Dalit dilemma in India. According to Lobo, of the 20 million Christians in India about 70%, that is 14 million are Dalits (243). The converts suffer from four distinct types of discrimination: from the Church, from the state, from the upper castes and from the lower castes (246). So even conversion, the last resort of the downtrodden, has betrayed the historically wronged masses of India, for as Lobo says, caste is older than the church:

There exists in each religion a wide gap between belief and practices. Christianity has no caste but Christians have caste. Therefore it is necessary that reservations are de-linked from the Hindu religion. The constitution guarantees freedom of
religion and a Dalit should be free to practice any religion he or she wants. As of now if a Christian Dalit reverts to Hinduism he becomes eligible for reservations. This has made some Dalit Christians in Andhra revert to Hinduism. The bias of the state in favour of Hinduism is clear in a state that boasts of secularism [...] Dalit Christians have developed a kind of dual identity. They have their caste identity, like Mahars and Vankars, and at the same time hyphenated labels such as Christy Mahars and Christy Vankars [...] In general in the context of patriarchy and caste, it is admitted that just as the upper castes look down upon them, Dalit men also oppress their own women. Dalit women have to bear labour pain, produce labor power and suffer the brunt of poverty more than the men. Besides Dalit women are easy targets of rape and other atrocities from males, especially of the dominant castes. (251-6)

This is the reality of conversion in cultures in which caste system was enforced on the people to protect elite interests. Unfortunately the Christian intervention in India has produced little to improve the cultural and social status of the Bahujans, in spite of evangelist educational efforts. In a way, as Lobo says, it further deteriorated the cultural crisis and the human dilemma related to identity and egalitarian dignity. This is not just a lonely
voice, but the committed research that has been done in the area also agrees with this human crisis related to caste and conversion in India. In *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* Gauri Viswanathan looks closely at this impasse of identity, and observes the importance of conversion as a form of cultural and religious critique. She also establishes the need to historicize conversion not just as a spiritual but an immensely significant political activity, the narrativization of which marks the momentous transitions to secular societies. In *Search of Identity* by Sebastian C H Kim analyzes this problematic by discussing both the missionary and the Hindutva views of conversion from the colonial era to the present. Reviewing Dick Kooiman’s *Conversion and Social Equality in India: The London Missionary Society in South Travancore in the 19th Century*, M S S Pandian comments on the interaction between the Church and the colonial regime:

While movements like Narayana Guru’s rose from the ranks of the oppressed and challenged the power laden and highly differentiated local structures basing themselves fully on indigenous cultural resources (like reinterpreting Hindu religious texts) the missionary efforts were often mediations from the top and their universe of reference was never indigenous. The church and indigenous protest movements were often alternatives and not substitutes.16
While scholars like Tanika Sarkar argue that the colonial rule and the church compromised considerably with the Hindu Brahmanic patriarchy and the upper castes in retaining hegemony, Arunoday Guha is concerned about the double labyrinth of Christian Dalithood that robs the victims of their constitutional rights. The futility of re-conversion is the thrust of the argument in Biswamoy Pati since caste, not religion, is the key factor. Lobo provides the details:

Indigenization efforts of the church in India have been and are largely along Sanskritic lines. There are a number of reasons why the church in India has glorified Sanskritic rather than non Sanskritic tradition. Briefly (a) it had subscribed to ‘down ward filtration theory’, viz. you change the tip of the pyramid; (b) nationalism and patriotism were expressed in the Hindu idiom and the church was keen to throw off the colonial baggage and show itself as Indian; and (c) non Sanskritic tradition is looked down upon as mumbo jumbo, low, uncouth, rural, illiterate, backward, superstitious and inferior. Antyodaya, viz. looking at reality from the perspective of the poor, is a far cry. (256)

The question of conversion to minority religions and the problematic it initiates too have been looked at very closely by academic studies. Biswamoy Pati after looking at the history of Dalit conversion to Christianity
in Orissa for the last two hundred years questions the way conversion has been located (perhaps vitally relevant in the BJP initiated debate on Conversion during 2002-03). Pati questions the basis of ‘re-conversion’ to Hinduism since it acknowledges the reconverted as outcastes and not as caste Hindus. The question and riddle of caste in conversion is still an ongoing debate. This is the socio political milieu in which we are discussing the representation of these underdogs of Indian society in a fictional narrative.

*The God of Small Things* is set in Kerala, where the Church boasts of a continuous history of two thousand years. The novel has already been read in several ways, as for example, as an attempt to derail hegemonic history with fictional counter history, as an attempt to distort and question the logic of the grand narrative of Kerala’s historiography. The first chapter itself initiates the central theme of the narrative, the caste as social evil. Estha, the boy among the two egg twins of Ammu, the central woman character in the novel, encounters the history of oppression:

Estha walked past the village school that his grand father built for untouchable children. (13)

The buried ashes of caste oppression and the history of struggles are subtly invoked and the fundamental dichotomy of touchable and untouchable human beings is introduced in to the narrative from this moment onwards. The untouchable Velutha’s arrest again brings to the fore this vital question:
It actually began thousands of years ago. Long before the Marxists came. Before the British took Malabar, before the Dutch Ascendancy, before Vasco da Gama arrived, before the Zamorin’s conquest of Calicut. Before three purple-robed Syrian Bishops murdered by the Portuguese were found floating in the sea, with coiled sea serpents riding on their chests and oysters knotted in their tangled beards. It could be argued that it began long before Christianity arrived in a boat and seeped into Kerala like tea from a tea bag. That it really began in the days when the love laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much. (33)

“Pappachi’s Moth” the second chapter presents the Communist movement of Kerala and its confrontation of the caste question and how it failed totally in its class analysis in a caste-ridden society. The Savarna leadership (of which Pillai and Nampoodiripadu, the mediating middle man and “high priest of communism” (67) are typical representatives from real as well as hegemonic histories), along with the touchable Syrian Christian camaraderie (among them Chacko, Ammu’s communist brother is one.) were eager to mobilize the muscle power and voting potential of the untouchables, at the same time keen to preserve the old laws of hierarchy, love laws included:
The real secret was that communism crept into Kerala insidiously. As a reformist movement that never overtly questioned the traditional values of a caste ridden, extremely traditional community. The Marxists worked from within the communal divides, never challenging them, never appearing not to. They offered a cocktail revolution. A heady mix of Eastern Marxism and orthodox Hinduism, spiked with a shot of democracy. (36)

Velutha is introduced as part of a communist workers rally. He is an untouchable Paravan and a card-holding member of the party. The narrative presents the Paravans from the caste conscious Syrian Christian point of view. The Syrian Christians are ardent practitioners of untouchability, since they claim the lineage of caste Hinduism and even Brahmanism:

As a young boy Velutha would come with Vellya Paapen to the back entrance of the Ayemenem house to deliver the coconuts they had plucked from the trees in the compound. Pappachi would not allow Paravans in to the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that touchables touched. Caste Hindus and Caste Christians. Mammachi told Estha and Rahel that she could remember a time, in her girlhood, when 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. In Mammachi’s time, Paravans like other untouchables were not allowed to walk on public roads not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They have to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed. (73-74)

Thus the conversion into Caste Christianity was futile for the untouchables, as it is still is for the Dalits in Kerala. The narrative radically represents the undeniable dilemma of purity and pollution, and the contempt for working culture and communities shared by those self-fashioned aristocrats who survive on the labor and production of these masses. Though western intervention and colonial administration resulted in some degree of change it still survives:

When the British came to Malabar, a number of Paravans, Pelayas and Pulayas(among them Velutha’s grandfather Kelan) converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican church to escape the scourge of untouchability. As added incentive they were given a little food and money. They were known as the Rice-Christians. It didn’t take them long to realize that they had jumped from the frying pan in to the fire.
They were made to have separate churches, with separate services and separate priests. As a special favour they were even given their own separate pariah Bishop. After independence they found they were not entitled to any Government benefits like job reservations or bank loans at low interest rates, because officially on paper, they were Christians, and therefore casteless. It was a little like having to sweep away your footprints without a broom. Or worse, not being allowed to leave footprints at all. (74)

The working people were eternally subjugated and victimized and their hard labour exploited for their torture by this brutal system of social engineering. This system provided unparalleled instances of knowledge/power discourses and sites of subalternity. Nothing but life long slavery and sub human fidelity is expected and allowed in this system. See Vellya Paapen’s existence in subalternity. He lives through it as a penance and finally informs his lords about his son’s violation of the old rules and waits before his hut to kill his own young son, a loyal slave, informer and torturer of his own progeny, all in one. This is precisely what the caste system demands from the outcastes:

Vellya Paapen however was an old world Paravan. He had seen the crawling backwards days [...] his gratitude widened his smile and bent his back. (78)
The word “touchable” is repeatedly used in the narrative to invokes its opposite, the untouchable. The repeated use of the word to refer to persons and things also inverts the whole project of purity and pollution and invokes irony. The narrative also identifies the purity-pollution core of the caste psyche in Baby Kochamma’s contemptuous remark; “how could she stand the smell, these Paravans have a peculiar smell” (78).

As caste Christianity became another version of caste Hinduism, caste communism was the next to follow. Pillai and Nampoodiripadu are typical representations of caste camaraderie in Kerala. The touchable upper castes or the Savarnas and the Syrian Christians have hijacked the leadership and the decision making power in the party, that has become another Brahmanic Varnasrama or yet another church thriving on the dreams of revolution and an egalitarian society by exploiting the aspirations and man power resources of the untouchable people, the subaltern classes. Like Velutha, they owned only party cards but not power. At critical moments they were turned away unprotected from the leaders’ houses like that of Pillai’s. The Savarna comrades mediate between the masses, the caste, capitalism, and even the state. See the equivocations of K N M Pillai with the party workers, his business clients and the police. He is a trade union leader and a printing press owner at the same time. He prints the labels of a factory by night in which he organizes strikes of the workers by day.
Regarding the arrest of his own party-man, the untouchable Velutha, he is with the touchable inspector and the system.

This feudalist, patriarchal and casteist camaraderie is under attack in the narrative. Pillai is pictured as a male chauvinist pig. His patriarchal affirmations are explicit in his dealings with his wife Kalyani, and in the way he uses her as a loyal servant and his naughty sexist puns about her made in public. When Velutha came to him at night for help he was enjoying curd and sugar with some banana. Without the trace of camaraderie he turned him away at that critical juncture and returned to another banana served specially by Kalayani. The opportunist Savarna feudal comrades’ courtship with communism is further ridiculed in another inversion that tells the tale of Nampoodiripadu’s old granary now turned in to a hotel (126).

This typical representation that exposes the casteist core of communism and the Brahmanical conspiracy that has permeated the epistemology in India, reminds us of Kancha Ilaiah’s observation regarding the conflict between Brahmanical and Dalit Bahujan epistemologies that forms the major chunk of historic processes in India:

In epistemological terms, the Indian nationalist discourse (pre and post independence) expressed itself in the thought process of three schools: (a) Religious nationalism of which Hinduism is the central and hegemonic school, (b) Dalit bahujan nationalism which believed in restructuring the
Indian society in to a casteless, classless egalitarian sangha and (c) Communist, secular, socialist nationalism which believed in ‘abolition of class’ (on the European model) with a caste blind scheme of ‘revolution’ or transformation of the Indian society into a ‘secular, socialist and communist’ society. Though the first and third schools appear to be antagonistic in their discourses of transformation, the social forces that were engaged in this discourse did not differ in their roots of existence and formation. In caste/class term they belonged to the Brahmanical upper and middle class. Though their consciousness appeared to be antagonistic to each other, their being and self remained Hindu. This was one of the main reasons why the Marxist and socialist schools failed to problematise and critique Hinduism and Brahmanism […]. The post colonial Indian thus inherited two epistemological discourses, the Dalit Bahujan nationalist discourses and the Hindu nationalist discourse. Though a third school called the Marxist school emerged it remained in the hands of Brahmanical upper castes and as far as the Dalit bahujans were concerned, it remained ‘a green snake in green grass’ (after Kanshi Ram’s expressions of the CPI(M) as the
green snake in green grass and BJP as the white snake in green grass since their agenda is too explicit. (121,126)

Not just Savarna but Syrian capitalist camaraderie too is under criticism. The reference is to Chacko's "Marxist mind and feudal libido."(168). The women of the family see nothing wrong in "men's needs." They have therefore provided enough exits and doors to the house for the smooth functioning of this patriarchal practice, and even bribed the women victims:

The enigmatic, secretly thrilling notion of men's needs gained implicit sanction in the Aymenem house. Neither Mammachi nor Babay kochamma saw any contradiction between Chacko's Marxist mind and feudal libido. They only worried about the Naxalites who had been known to force men from good families to marry servant girls whom they had made pregnant. Of course they did not even remotely suspect that the missile when it was fired, the one that would annihilate the family's good name for ever, would come from a completely unexpected quarter. (168)

See the sheer power of the patriarchal worldview in operation within the caste psyche. It is again the woman who is chained in the love laws. The man has his instinctual, legitimate needs! The question of the honour of a caste/community is again limited and ascribed to the female sexuality and to
the female body. When Chacko rapes untouchable women it is natural and when an untouchable man makes love with a touchable Christian woman it is taboo, and deadly dangerous.

How cherished and priced is this touchable identity is again illustrated in the incident of Kochumaria the cook stitching her ear lobes to preserve her Syrian Christian looks. To remain a touchable caste-Christian can be quite strenuous:

Her right lobe had once split open and was sewn together again by Dr Verghese Verghese. Kochu Maria couldn’t stop wearing her kunukku because if she did, how would people know that despite her lowly cook’s job (seventy five rupees a month) she was a Syrian Christian, Mar Thomite? Not a Pulaya or a Paravan. But a touchable upper caste Christian (in to whom Christianity had seeped like tea from a teabag).

Split lobes stitched back were a better option by far. (170)

While the caste conscious Christians thus stitched and re-stitched their touchable identity, the outcastes, the untouchables were pushed to the periphery for a subhuman marginal existence. The description of the subaltern hut of the Paravans is remarkable. Sensitive readers may acknowledge it as a re-writing of Asan’s portrayal of Chathan’s hut in Duravastha of the early twentieth century:
Kuttappan, Velutha's older brother was paralysed from his chest downwards. Day after day, month after month while his brother was away and his father went to work, Kuttappan lay flat on his back and watched his youth saunter past without stopping to say hello. All day he lay there listening to the silence of huddled trees with only a domineering black hen for company. He missed his mother, Chella, who had died in the same corner of the room that he lay in now. She had died a coughing, spitting, aching phlegmy death. Kuttappen remembered noticing how her feet died long before she had. How the skin on them grew grey and lifeless. How fearfully he kept vigil on his own numb feet with mounting terror. Occasionally he poked at them hopefully with a stick that he kept propped up in the corner to defend himself against visiting snakes. He had no sensation in his feet at all, and only visual evidence assured him that they were still connected to his body, and were indeed his own. After Chella died, he was moved into her corner, the corner that Kuttappan imagined was the corner of his home that death had reserved to administer her deathly affairs. One corner for cooking, one for clothes, one for bedding rolls, one for dying in. (206)
But unlike his brother who was literate and able, Kuttappan “was a good, safe Paravan. He could neither read nor write” (207). That is the important thing about the untouchables, that is, as long as they remain simple, naïve and illiterate they are good. The moment they become questioning and aware of their rights, they become bad. The knowledge/power base of the hegemonic systems and discourses are subtly evoked in this remark.

So when the taboo is broken for the worse it takes the outcaste Paapen by surprise that Kochamma had touched him, as Mammachi kicks him out of her kitchen door as he informs her about the illicit relation between Velutha and Ammu, the untouchable man and touchable woman:

He was taken completely by surprise. Part of the taboo of being an untouchable was expecting not to be touched. At least not in these circumstances. Of being locked into a physically impregnable cocoon. (256)

The touchable caste Christian spits on him and calls him dog and his caste name. The animal in him is addressed and he pledges to tear Velutha limb from limb. The touchable lady could not even imagine that:

She imagined it in vivid detail; a Paravan’s coarse black hand on her daughter’s breast. His mouth on hers. His black hips jerking between her parted legs. The sound of their breathing. His particular Paravan smell. Like animals, Mammachi thought and nearly vomited. Like a dog with a
bitch on heat. Her tolerance of men’s needs as far as her son was concerned became the fuel for her unmanageable fury at her daughter. She had defiled generations of breeding and brought the family to its knees. (257-58)

See the beast imagery that is used to describe the outcaste in the caste imagination. It is indicative of the animal existence that is imagined and allowed in the caste worldview to the outcasts. They are not human beings belonging to the fourfold castes in Brahmanic Hinduism, but are mere animals unworthy of human rights. Another vital and key issue in caste ideology, that of endogamy too is explicitly mentioned in the passage. The notion of pure and noble breeding is central to the hegemonic claims of all elitist and fascist ideologies. Here too the touchable Caste Syrian Christian legacy has been violated and corrupted by the aboriginal sperm. But again the patriarchal double standards of this Savarna/Syrian morality is exposed in its excusing of men’s needs and despising the needs of women. We are presented here with a further problematic of caste, that it is not related entirely to purity/pollution and endogamy, but is deepened by gender questions as well as by the economics of class and capital. We have seen this gender, economic and cultural capital appropriation and monopoly in the character of Pillai, who is a typical capitalist, patriarch and caste/feudal lord at the same time. This communist is with the right wing and the police in connection with the “paravan’s issue” (262). He speaks the same language of
the inspector, he has no doubts about the brutal treatment that should be meted out to an outcaste who violates the old hierarchy (278). His brand of comrades are working day and night to protect the hegemony and hierarchy and not to abolish them. The text prompts the suggestion that even Christianity has not deceived Keralites as Marxism did, or at least as its Savarna leadership did.

So when the touchable policemen hunts down and tortures the untouchable man it carries all these significations. The outcaste who violates the taboos has no friends. Not just men and women, even caste children abandon the outcaste. “The mother loved by night the man her children loved by day.” “All three of them loved him to death.” But no one loved him to save his life. That is the real tragedy of the man and his community, whom the caste system pushes out to the peripheries of existence. They are imagined, narrativized, used and eliminated. It is so easy a game, even in the present:

Their work abandoned by god and history, by Marx, by man, by woman and by children, lay folded on the floor. He was semi conscious, but wasn’t moving. His skull was fractured in three places.... (310)

One striking difference in the representations regarding the gender question and the caste question in the novel is its inability to attack the social structures and worldviews presented by caste. While the narrative effectively
subverts the superiority image of patriarchy and its phallocentric ideology through the technique of subversive comparisons and analogies, as in the repeated references to the “balls” of men and parallel references to the odd balls of dying dogs in the initial chapters of the novel. The male libidinal zones and centres are often reduced to banality in the narrative by adopting a kind of de-mythicization. As against the frequent references to women’s body appearing in commonplace writing, repeated, seemingly casual but politically precise and targeted, references to men’s body in such a way as to bring home its ugliness and beastliness is widely deployed. But unfortunately such a subversive rhetoric is nowhere in evidence in confronting the ancient hierarchies. The narrative seems already resigned to the predisposition that all this revolt is going to be wasted as the untouchable’s destiny has already been stated in the first chapter. The rest is only a long excavation into the details of the “mishap,” and the spirit of confrontation and subversion shown in the representation of patriarchy is not extended to the representation of caste.

The narrative’s impatience with the patriarchal worldview in other words, has not been extended to the casteist worldview. The fundamental question of caste is therefore left unanswered. Sufficient efforts are not employed to subvert its logic even from the narrative space of fiction. It is all the more important as there are many references to fiction as a flight from reality, as the point in the narrative where the twins make themselves believe
that the man brutally tortured by the police before them was not Velutha but his twin brother. Taking asylum in fiction is a leit-motif in the narrative, expressed throughout as in the disguised drama of Mrs Pillai and Mrs Rajagopalan by the children earlier. Even the narrative voice seems to escape from the haunting realities of history into the world of fiction and fantasy. That is precisely the impression the reader gets when the sexual union in all its sensuous vibrancy is presented in the last chapter, after eliminating from the scene the untouchable who violated the old taboos and love laws. He is destined to receive his “normal” punishment for his deeds (since love laws of the caste hierarchy are equated with destiny itself, at least in effect) but his forbidden fictional fantasy is being safely and submissively narrativized, without causing any challenge to the caste equilibrium.

As for the representation of the subhuman and beastly existence allowed to the outcastes, the narrative can be deemed to be splendidly successful in this endeavour. The fundamental question of social exclusion, and the exercise of power in society to engineer and control the marginality of outcastes and its maintenance: issues of control of mobility, dressing, language, education, customs, religion and worship, in addition to the practices and possibilities of inter marriage, inter dining and egalitarian social interaction, representation in political and public service and in government are contextually evoked. The representation of the untouchable hut is a typical instance of narrating marginal existence of those who are spatially
and socially pushed to the periphery. The references to the untouchable school, the separate “untouchable” parish and priests for the untouchable “Christians”, and the smell and the destiny of the untouchable comrade— all substantiate the most wretched and abominable of hegemonies, still eluding egalitarian resolutions. Even when fiction tries to represent the gender questions tangibly and presents a visibility to gender inequalities and violence, the question of caste, despite tremendous efforts and struggles at representing it, remains covert and invisible. It becomes elusive as in the hands of the communist camaraderie that it tries to critique. Caste becomes the un-representable in conversion. But the whole debate over conversion, its radical history and its self-defeating problematic are narrativized with its complexities as a critique of the Nation and its cultural ordering.

Notes


Ambedkar’s notion of nationalism results primarily from the dichotomy between the political and the social. As is well known, the nationalist leaders, and more particularly the Hindu nationalists, laid emphasis on the political, almost ignoring the social aspect of nationalism. Ambedkar’s argument was that in the absence of any comprehensive critique of the caste system and Hinduism the political is bound to suggest that the local/indigenous tyrants are preferable on ‘patriotic grounds.’ Emphasizing that Ambedkar was pointedly critical of nationalist Hindu homogenization, he continues: “Phule and Ambedkar were forced to adopt alternative narrative resources and dalit bhujan vocabularies which were attuned to collective struggle for both the deconstruction of the official nationalist discourse within the indigenous but egalitarian and emancipatory traditions.”


Rakesh Sharma, *Final Solution*, 2004; a documentary film on Gujarat Genocide (2002), that traces the bloody saffron trajectory of sexual violence on minority women and even children. For a fictional rendering of the same see Rahul Dholakia’s feature film *Parzania*, 2005.


Mahatma Phule received primary education in a Missionary School in nineteenth century Maharashtra, and has acknowledged this through his life and efforts. In late nineteenth and early twentieth century Kerala, Narayana Guru has observed that the British are the ones who gave the untouchable Bahujans the right of learning and asceticism (“Sanyasam”). See K Ayyappan, *Padya Krithikal*, ed., M K Sanu. (Kottayam, D C B, 1986 (1934)), and also K A Subramanyam. And also Rosalind O’Hanlon, *Caste. Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotiba Phule and Low caste Social Protest in Nineteenth century western India* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988).


20 All quotations from the text are from Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (New Delhi: India Ink, 1997).