CHAPTER 1

Caste in Religion: *Godan, Song of the Loom*

It is god who creates the high and the low. One comes into wealth after a lot of penance. It is the fruit of the deeds of our past life. We sowed nothing and we have nothing to reap.

*(Godan 18)*

There were groups within groups, like the numerous strands unravelled from a single, partially coloured silken thread.

*(Song of the Loom 5)*

Recent scholarship identifies Premchand as the first Hindi/Urdu writer to take up the Dalit Bahujan question as part of an explicit political agenda. Shashi Bhooshan Upadhyay says he was the first to portray the Dalits as independent and recognizable characters both as part of the poor and with their own particular problems. Meenakshi Mukherjee also contextualizes the text of *Godan* in its conflict ridden times.¹
The marginalia represented in *Godan* is that of the north Indian peasantry with its caste and gender attributes. It is a representation of the segment of the Indian society that becomes the base of the social and economic fabric of the nation, according to subaltern historians like Partha Chatterjee. The narrative is set in the casteist, feudal and Brahman centred Hindi/Urdu village of Uttar Pradesh and the title itself shows the central motif; the giving in charity of a cow to a Brahman. The peasant family of Hori Ram, his wife Dhania and son Gobar collapse in their struggle to own a cow and then to give another in charity to the Brahman.

The images of the cow and the Brahman are therefore as central to the narrative as is the culture it tries to represent and narrativize. This foregrounds the central characteristics of the ideology of Brahmanism and its material manifestation in Hinduism. The holy cow and the holy Brahman, the protection of which is proclaimed as the supreme duty of every Hindu, especially the Shudra, and valourized as one of the Sanatana Dharmas is a typical obscurantist dogma that perpetuated the Brahmanic hegemony.

This sacred supremacy of the cow over other milk-giving mammals like the buffalo and that of the Brahman over the Bahujan has been constructed and maintained in and through a range of metaphysical texts and social discourses and practices including those of purity and pollution. The cow and Brahman become sacred through divine and sacred origins; while the cow is a descendent of the heavenly Kamadhenu, the paradisiacal
archetypal mammal capable of giving anything, Brahman, the Bhudeva is a direct earthly incarnation of the gods. Both are objects of desire whose sanctity and purity are unquestionable and unsurpassable. This supremacy is further established in contrast and comparison, through the construction of “others” and opposites. While the cow is normally light skinned and mild, the buffalo is dark and rough. While the Brahman is “fairer and clean” the Bahujan is less so, and so on and so forth.4

This othering and stratification is also complicated through beastly associations attributed to the Bahujan. Thus the killing of the cow and Brahman are the supreme offences and the gifting of a cow, especially to its suitable counterpart, the Brahman is a supreme act of virtue that pleases the gods. These are some of the premises under which the Bahujans and Muslims who work in the meat and leather industry have been historically imagined and marked as others and evil incarnates. And it is the same sentimentality and governmentality that skirts around the sacred cow-Brahman nexus that the Hindu nationalists are utilizing in making cow slaughter a poll issue.5

This is the historical and cultural context in which we situate the infatuation of the peasantry for owning the cow and giving it away in charity to a Brahman, as enacted in the story of Hori in the narrative. Though they are the backbone of India’s economic production these peasants have always been outsiders to the system, condemned to live in material and cultural
margins due to the discursive contexts explained earlier. In the Belari village of Uttar Pradesh, Hori Ram and his wife Dhania, their son Gobardhan and daughters Sona and Rupa were struggling it out in a caste feudal system that indebted them and reduced them to mere bonded labour. In the words of Hori:

It is all due to keeping on good terms with the master that trouble has remained at arm's length from us. Otherwise we would have been wiped out of existence long ago. Out of scores of people in the village can you name one who has not been ejected from his land or been served with attachment orders? When your neck is being trampled under the tyrant's heel the safest course is to keep on tickling his feet. (5)

The subaltern peasantry, both men and women are enmeshed in this barbaric power structure that assumes fierce proportions in its mix-up with caste, Varna and Brahmanism. The feudal lord rules the village with an iron fist. See how the narrative has it: “Digvijay Singh, educated, but vain, heartless, tightfisted, chased low caste women of the village and kept disgusting company” (260). But the woman has some sense of justice to question the system of the Zamindari, the reign of the feudal caste lord:

But Dhania was not so well up in worldly matters, she thought that at the most what the Zamindar could claim was the rent in exchange for tilling his land. Then why play the
sycophant? Why should one touch the soles of a Zamindar's feet? To be sure, during the twenty years of her married life she had fully realized that even if she lived a niggardly life stinted on food and clothes scraped together every elusive anna, it was difficult to liquidate the rent of the Zamindar.

But even then she would not admit defeat. On this matter the husband and wife had differences every now and then. (5)

This is the penury they are fated to live in, and the struggle against the odds is visible in the woman and in the husband in different ways. For Hori the possession of a cow is a mark of his privileged social status. The significance of the cow as symbolic capital has been dealt with. The cow assumes this symbolic and iconic relevance in relation to the signifying systems and discourses of Brahmanism. It has its material links to the Varna and caste system as well as to the systems of language and culture. As the marker of his social status as a 'worthy householder' in the village, it signifies his Brahmanical connection and assimilated 'culture':

Not a cow of native breed, Oh those were no good. Their yield of milk was poor and their calves good for nothing. Only fit to be yoked to an oil expeller. He had set his heart on a foreign pedigreed cow. He would swamp her with care. She would yield plentiful milk [...] the cow of course would not cost less than two hundred rupees. What did it matter?
Didn’t a cow tied by the door enhance the *prestige of the house*? And how *auspicious* to see a cow the first thing in the morning! (7)

The emphases clearly show the romanticized/mythicized obscurantist discourse that makes the cow an obscure object of desire, connected with the high culture of Brahmanism. See the contempt for the native breeds and the longing for the foreign cattle. The privileging of the non-native over the native in the discourse that does the legitimizing and canonizing function for the Sanskritized Brahmanic etiquette of ‘auspiciousness’ and social ‘prestige’ is to be taken note of. “Like every householder Hori for a long time had been cherishing this desire for the cow. It was the brightest dream of his life, his greatest ambition” (7).

Thus to become a ‘householder’ you need to own a cow, not a goat or buffalo. Though *Hori manages to get a cow from Bhola, a neighbour, his jealous brother Hira poisons it*. This fact again indicates how precious and cherished an object is the cow in the popular imagination. The arrival of the cow itself was uplifting for the simple folk: “With the cow’s arrival a great change came over Dhania: proud she talked of nothing but the animal” (75).

Also note the “change” at its death:

Dhania beat her head in despair. Hori ran to fetch Pandit Datadin, the self appointed veterinary of the village. The news ran through the village and people collected at Hori’s
door. The cow it was evident had been poisoned. Poisoning the sacred cow! It was unheard of! Everyone was stunned. Hira most of all. He fumed with rage, threatening to hack the beastly culprit to pieces if he could lay his hands on him. (79)

To intensify the emotional tension of the narrative the discourse changes from the mimetic to the dialogic at this moment. It also registers the cosmic effect of this most heinous act that is culturally specific: “The village lay in darkness; the cow dead and at a distance of ten feet from her, Hori tossing on his cot. Only the belt round the bullock’s necks tinkled now and then. Hori’s gloom seemed to make the night darker” (80).

Gobar falls in love with Jhunia, the widowed young daughter of Bhola. She becomes pregnant and is given asylum by Hori and Dhania, as Gobar goes to the city for work. This leads to the ostracism of the family by the village worthies. A fine is also imposed on them. The infuriated Bhola also walks away with Hori’s pair of bullocks. Hori works as a common labourer in other fields. He is also submerged in debt that keeps on increasing at alarming rates of interest. Even Gobar refuses to help since he could not agree with the old man’s fatalistic affiliations. Towards the end of his life Hori works hard as a coolie by day and a weaver by night to make money for buying a cow, and to feed his grandchild. But he perishes in the heat and escapes the problems of the family. Dhania also tries to give a cow in charity to a Brahman. She does not succeed in it and when the Brahman
comes the old woman also breathes her last by confessing that there is neither
cow nor money in the house.

Not only obscurantist and hegemonic discourses like those of purity
and pollution, previous births and Karma, and of divine sanctions and
supremacy, but ritual also plays a very important role in the sustenance of
caste-Hindu village societies. The narrative also depicts this aspect:

For six months in twelve, you can hear drums and cymbals
celebrating one festival or the other [...] the village of Semari
is no exception. The threat of the money lenders and the
oppression of the underlings of the Zamindars cannot curb the
villager’s zest. It matters little if the peasant starves or has no
shirt on his back and no money in his pocket. (172-3)

These village festivals are the seminal sites which ensure the
reestablishment of a sense of hierarchy and institutionalized inequality
through their caste-feudal loyalties and ritual relations. Though some critics
are of the opinion that the city episodes of Rai Sahib and the Mehta-Malti
accounts provide a contrast to this rural primitivism, it is also an extension of
the caste Swaraj. The Hindu city as the Hindu village is ruled over by family
names and caste supremacy discourses. ⁶

Another item of the symbolic capital that ties down the subaltern
peasantry is land. It is another source of prestige in the village and is as
important as the cow and the Brahmanic connection. See the dispute
between Hori and his progressive-minded son Gobar, who is critical of the traditional practices of the villagers, and prefers a city life:

It is no use arguing with you my son, Hori said. ‘Does anybody ever give up his ancestral property? Look at us for instance. What do we get out of our land? ... But we don’t give up our land and go in for a job. Do we? Our prestige gets in the way. Well that is exactly the case with the Zamindar.’ (17)

Ancestral property is also considered sacred in the religious sense as ancestral occupation, something that sustains the occupational underpinning of caste. The questioning younger generation is taught that the inequality and the hierarchy are god given, religious and natural:

‘So do you think there is no difference between him and us?’

‘None. God has made us all equal.’ ‘That is not true son; it is god who creates the high and the low. One comes into wealth after a lot of penance. It is the fruit of the deeds of our past life. We sowed nothing and we have nothing to reap.’

‘These are only fancies that console the mind. God has created us all equal. Those who have power oppress the poor and become rich.’ (18)

This sense of guilt in the past life and the Karma theory has been central in subordinating the masses as Shudras and Avarnas under caste
Hinduism. The instinct for equality is aborted in birth itself through religious sentiments and meta-spiritual fantasies. To counter the challenge of Buddhism, the eighth century Brahmanic ideologue Sankara propagated the Karma and Maya theories among the masses throughout the peninsula. For this hegemonic pedagogic practice he established Brahmanic Maths all over the peninsula. He is widely known as Prachanna Buddha for his cunning appropriation of the Buddha’s Sunyavada into Hindu/Brahmanic Mayavada and Advaita. According to critics like J Reghu, Advaita is a rejection of the other and an assertion of the empire of the Self. Since there is nothing beyond the One, and since the other is impossible in the unending oneness, ethics and politics are also impossible in this totalizing order of the self. Here ethics is understood as the unconditional acknowledgment of the existence of the other. This empire of the eternal Sovereign Self was the prototype of late nineteenth century cultural nationalist avatars of Hindu revivalism, the recent resurgences of the unending trajectory of Brahmanic Hindu colonialism. See the articulations and operations of the same self-centred, supremacist discourse in Datadin’s voice, which entangles the peasant in eternal debt and doubling interest rates:

'Son, I am a Brahman, you wont live in peace by devouring my money...I am a Brahman and I know how to get back my money. You will come to my doors and offer me the money on bent knees.' Gobar was unperturbed. But a storm raged in
Hori’s mind. Had it been a Thakur’s or Bania’s money it wouldn’t have mattered. But a Brahman’s money! God keep him from a Brahman’s wrath. They said if a Brahman’s wrath visited a person not a single member in the family survived. Hori’s religious sentiments tugged at his mind. He ran and fell at Datadin’s feet. ‘Maharaj as long as I live I will see that I pay back every piece of your debt. Pay no heed to what my son has said. This matter is between you and me. He can’t interfere.’(176)

This social and ‘spiritual’ subordination is followed by the subaltern’s physical and even bodily invasion by Brahmanism. The historic construction of sexual colonies among Shudra women by Brahmans was a complete conquest of the bodies and minds. The Brahmanic patriarchy wants to master the subaltern woman’s sexuality, which can be potentially subversive to the masculine discourses of Brahmanism: “that a low caste woman should be so haughty was too much for Pateshwari” (217). Though the low castes are polluting by touch and sometimes by sight, the high priests of Brahmanism could well manage to sleep with the subaltern woman. Not just money but the beauty of the subaltern woman too is an offering to the Brahman, as Jhunia tells Gobar. Look at the way Datadin, the temple priest, seduces the low caste women of the village:
‘What will you reply when god asks: I gave you so much beauty and you didn’t even look kindly at a Brahman. Speak up. I am a Brahman thirsting for a word from your lips. I get money in alms everyday it is your beauty’s alms that I crave for today.’ (38)

The same is the story of Matadin, the priest’s prodigy who seduces a Chamar girl named Selia. The Brahman sleeps with her but refuses the food she touches. The ‘purity’ is retained through early morning baths and associated rituals. It goes to such an extent that finally the Chamar folk had to make him a Chamar by pushing down a bone under his throat. How he got his ‘purity’ back is more revealing:

After spending a couple of hundred rupees on the Pandits of Banaras, Matadin had again been declared a Brahman and taken back into the fold. That day a big yajya was performed, scores of Brahmans feasted, many mantras chanted as part of the purification ceremony, Matadin had to taste cow dung and cow’s urine; the cow dung purified his heart and the urine killed the pernicious bacteria of defilement that had got lodged in his soul. (273)

The narrative foregrounds the riddles of purity and pollution and the ritualistic dogma of Brahmanism with a reformist zeal and suggests an
alternative movement that appears a little too down-to-earth for the high
priests:

Well the penance did really purify him. From that day he
developed a revulsion for dharma, and dumped his priesthood
in the Ganga. For he realized that although his patrons still
asked him to work out auspicious dates and consulted him in
matters of marriage and births. They refused water from his
hands and did not allow him to touch their utensils: in spite of
the fact that the Pandit in Banaras have accepted him as a
Brahman. In disgust he turned a tiller of the soil. (273)

He ends up in Selia’s hut. confessing that he will worship her and that her hut
is his temple. He says he wants to become a cobbler, but still he has this
binary of the Brahman/cobbler in his discourse, reminding us of
Praneshacharya in Samskara (see the third chapter), who even after the whole
ordeal reduces the Bahujan culture as a mere cockfight. Matadin has it this
way: “all those who fulfill their dharma are Brahman, and all those who
violate their dharma are cobblers” (275).

This points towards a general pattern obtaining in the Indian
fictional narratives. While narrativizing the tension between the two
epistemologies of Brahmanism and Bahujan culture, even works that appear
to resist hegemonic discourses end up reasserting the existing power
relations. This is indicated by the novel Gramayana also that reestablishes
the master-slave relationship at the concluding part. We feel the same frustrated sense of the unchangeability of the social hierarchy and hegemony in *The God of Small Things* too in the end. A domestic and personal reconciliation is suggested in *Thalamurakal* that takes up the greater questions of race and ethnicity. Such a general pattern points towards the inadequacy of the fictional discourse in confronting power and the intrinsic limitations of the narrative medium that fails to subvert hegemony. The cultural and artistic character of the genre’s ideology that neutralizes radicalism is also brought into the limelight. The formalistic/artistic/literary elements of the genre have their traditional and cultural affiliations with the prevalent tastes, worldviews and hegemonic ideology. But what is interesting is that again and again these narrative works bring to light the inevitable questions of caste, Brahmanism and social inequality that operate across religious cultures.

The religious minorities in India have always been outside the imagined nation space and the hegemonic cultural nationalist discourses monopolized and propagated by the elitist Hindu worldview. The history and politics of partition and the Mandir-Masjid politics and pogroms that followed in the last few decades orchestrated by the cultural nationalist forces have only helped to consolidate their cultural alienation and ‘othering.’ As the single largest minority group that could slightly threaten, at least in the Hindi/Urdu belt, the pseudo-majoritarian ideology of Hindutva and present
an alternative religion for the Bahujan masses, Muslims have been the specific targets of this fascist rightwing propaganda in post-independence India.\textsuperscript{11} From the time of the origin of cultural nationalism in nineteenth century Bengal renaissance, Muslims were at the receiving end of the symbolic violence appearing in the nationalist discourses, and this continues in the popular cinema, in television serials and in media representations.\textsuperscript{12} The atrocities are not confined to symbolic and metaphorically hegemonic violence, but are perpetrated at the material, racial and ethnic levels leading to holocausts.\textsuperscript{13} Almost all of the post-independence riots and pogroms have resulted in Muslim casualties.\textsuperscript{14} The 1984 Delhi genocide exterminated five thousand Sikhs and the 2002 Gujarat massacre witnessed the organized annihilation of thousands of Muslims.\textsuperscript{15} Thus it is not just the Dalit Bahujans or the ‘Mlechas’ who come under attack from the forces of Indian fascism, but the religious minorities as well, especially Muslims, Sikhs and Christians.\textsuperscript{16}

This context of symbolic and actual massacre as well as the cultural erasure and purging of the collective unconscious as a consent-manufacturing process problematizes any attempt at the ethico-political representation of the minority marginalia in India.\textsuperscript{17} *Song of the Loom* (1996), a fictional narrative attempt at representing the life of Muslim weavers, women, men and children who struggle for their livelihood in Banaras, assumes significance here. This Urdu novel by Abdul Bismillah which takes its original title *Jhini Jhini Bini*
Chadariya from poet Kabir who was also a master weaver of Banaras, portrays the hard toil of the community of Ansaris in and around this old North Indian city along the Ganges which is a sacred and central spot in the cultural geography of the Hindu imagiNation: “Banaras or Kashi is said to be the oldest city in the world” (Prologue).\(^{18}\) The location is significant as Banaras/Kasi is at the centre of the Brahmanical nation space, on whose margins reside the ‘Mlechas’ the others of the Brahmanic purity and pollution.\(^{19}\)

The story is simple and concerns the daily struggle for existence carried out by Mateen, a poor weaver of the renowned Banaras silk saris, and his ailing wife Aleemun, who could never afford to wear a single silk sari woven by her husband. “They were master craftsmen who wrought such wonders from silk to adorn the elite, the privileged, the makers of History” (Prologue).\(^{20}\) The weavers’ struggle to get a just remuneration and their efforts at escaping the shackles of the middlemen and exploiters are narrativized with subtlety and detail in the novel. One might see parallels between the intricate and vivid composition, a product of fictional weaving, and the art of silk weaving that forms the theme of the novel. Here we see how the message of working culture shapes the medium in subtle but suggestively political ways.

The subversive political potential of representation does not end with this form-theme merging narration that focuses on working people and their
culture. The narrative also exposes the vividness of the imagined, homogenized “other” peoples and communities. It etches the community as a plural and polyphonic formation. It also explodes the myth of “anti national and traitorous” minority pressure groups. It depicts the deep cleavages of class, caste and gender inequities and tensions within this marginalia of the imagined other community. It also problematizes the gendered and “new subaltern” identities from within the periphery of this marginalia.

Aleemun, the consumption-stricken wife of Mateen, is a representation of the erased existence of woman in this marginal and subaltern Mohallah. This ailing woman in the veil foregrounds the hidden patriarchy within the subaltern:

Aleemun had consumption. Mateen was painfully aware of this, but he could do nothing about it. A wife must attend to the household chores. The sorting, spinning and winding of yarn, the cooking, cleaning and washing—she had to do all this. There was no getting away from this. She had to remain in purdah too. She couldn’t go out in the open for fresh air, could she? The laws of society were absolute. It was a sin to violate them. Mateen knew this. From Chittanpura to Madanpura these laws were uniformly observed. The people living here were the followers of the Holy Prophet. They
were Ansaris the descendants of Hazrat Ayub Anssari, who had given refuge to his holy presence, the prophet. Mateen had grown up with this knowledge, but whether it was true he did not know. He did however abide by the laws. As did others. (4)

The domestic diversity and caste hangover is astonishing within this community of weavers and Muslims as a larger community. This could be situated within the Indian social reality of hierarchy and stratification in the historical context of Brahmanism and its Varna-caste ideology, that has contaminated all religious cultures. It also brings to the forefront the question of caste in conversion and that of the Dalit Bahujan Muslims.

In a way the entire world constitute a single community.

Within it there is another community known as India. Within India too, the Hindus have their own community. The Muslims their own. And then there is the Jolaha community of Banaras in which there are many divisions: Paancho (The Five), Chaudaho (The Fourteen), Baisi (The Twenty two), and Bavano (The Fifty two). There was even a new Baisi, now. Each group had its own elder, its own chief. But the elder of Paancho was considered supreme [...] there were groups within groups, like the numerous strands unraveled from a single, partially colored silken thread. (4-5)
These sub-caste groups were often at loggerheads with each other and were engaged in bloody feuds. This is apart from the Shia – Sunni divide that is almost universal among Muslims (219). Each group as in the Brahmanical sub-castes claimed antiquity, purity, ethnic superiority and cultural supremacy. The all-pervasive and hegemonic potential of the Brahmanical racist ideology could again be seen here:

Preparations were on since morning. Preparations! Not only for the Friday Namaz, but also for the clash. The original Baisi and the new one were at loggerheads. The dispute was about the maidan where the namaz was to be offered. That was all. And it had started with the formation of the new Baisi. (29)

Discontent, dissent and all kinds of regressions and escapisms that complicate the chaos of the margin are common among the male folk, who are squeezed to the core by the middlemen:

Those who don’t want to be seen committing a sin approached the palm grove under cover of the dusky shadows of the evening. Holding a corner of their lungis, with one hand, wearing skull caps, engrossed in talking about Allah and his prophet, singing the praises of Pakistan and heaping abuses on Hindustan, these people wandered like cranes into the grove by evening. (9)
Internal class exploitation of craftsmen and workers by rich merchants and middlemen are enacted in the Mateen – Ameerullah episode:

Mateen’s heart sank at Haaji saheb’s words. He failed to understand how Haji sahib unfailingly managed to find flows in each sari. Either the tension was too great, or it was too long. Or the pattern was unduly bold [...] the colour was not right [...] the silk had been spun too thin [...] the list was endless. And that was that - take it or leave it. (14)

The struggle and toil of the weaver is ‘immortalized’ here in a certain celebratory and romanticizing way with an echo of Kabir, the weaver-poet. But apart from making a faint reference to the saintly aspects of Kabir’s personality, the text makes no mention of the radical content and subversive aspect of Kabir’s poetry.

Rauf uncle was busy weaving. His aged body propped behind the loom looked exactly like the picture of Kabir in books. Mateen had seen the illustration in his class five book. Rauf uncle wore only a lungi and there was a skull cap on his head. He had taken off his shirt which lay beside him. There was a purple sari on the loom. Golden thread was coiled on the nari and silken thread on the dhota – as if the sun and moon were shining together in the sky as the loom of the universe moved in an incessant rhythm [...]. (28)
See the cosmic invocation of the heavenly bodies and the universal character of the romantic myth employed. The metaphoric narration takes a metaphysical turn here. This is one plane where the text defeats its own attempt to represent and articulate the subaltern voice and the marginal material reality. It also shares the fate of Kabir as a cult figure and a canonical poet, whose Dohas or Verses are now subjected celebrated through canonization and academic appropriation.

This hegemonic appropriation could again be seen signified in the Hindu hegemonic influence on the local Muslim festivals and customs. Divali and Karthik that encode historic, symbolic, genocidal racism and anti-other violence manufacture consent and support from the targets and preys themselves. It provides us the space to rethink about the shocking fact that all Hindu festivals celebrating the victory of the godly races against the uncultured others are getting wide currency and legitimacy among the Bahujan masses for whose ideological and symbolic subordination these were devised in the first place. For a superb example take for instance Onam the national festival of Kerala, which celebrates the end of Bali-Raj and the victory by cheat of disguised Brahmanism in the form of the dwarf with a sacred thread, Lord Vamana who is even worshipped as a deity in a Savarna temple in central Kerala in Thrikakara. What the above example suggests is that public discourses and semiotics are burdened with images and signs of
the dominant discourse and could assume hegemonic proportions in a very ‘normal’ way.

This year at Diwali Haji Ameerullah had distributed one kilo packs of sweets to his artisans. Previously it used to be half a kilo. Not even on the last Wednesday had they ever got a one kilo pack [...] the Hindu artisans came from the village got an extra half kilo pack each. (27-8)

These festivals were also sites of contestation and conflict, time for bloody negotiations of old rivalries and feuds;

Holi went by safely without incident. The question of safety or otherwise hung over this festival because any Hindu child could accidentally throw colour on a Muslim brother [...] even such a small incident, though, could easily take an ugly turn. (44)

Another typical instance of the romanticization of the weaver community’s misery could be seen in the hyperbolic analogy of a Tabla player. As mentioned above in the early part of the novel there are many cosmic and clichéd images that help to elevate the material misery as noble and uplifting:

Like a tabla player, who first taps the tabla to adjust its tautness, then tries it out for tone and finally begins the accompaniment to the song. So too the cadence of music and
design emerging in the texture of the sari fused with the consciousness of the artist at one point till it vanished altogether. (51-2)

But the representation of woman is more radical and subversive. The real margin within the margin is lighted up to reveal the veiled victims in the Purdah, the victims of subaltern patriarchy.23

Lateef had divorced Kamrun. When Aleemun gave this news to Mateen he was not surprised. Divorce had become quite common in the community. What was the status of a woman, after all? [...] To be kicked in the ass and thrown out whenever the husband wanted. That was the way to deal with a woman. Wasn’t it? She was there to spin, cook, clean and to sleep with her husband, bear his children and look after his needs. If she demurred in doing any of these, he could follow the laws of Islam and pronounce the verdict of divorce on her [...] ‘Talaq! Talaq! Talaq!’ (56)

As Hindu festivals and rituals are hegemonic and all-pervasive so are acts of black magic and witchcraft. Hindu gods, demons and their keepers and exorcists also transgress religious boundaries.24 The Bahujans in particular are the historic victims of such occult practices. Exorcism and purification also target and exploit women sexually and psychologically (see
for instance Rehana’s story, 74). Significantly, it is always women who are possessed, and termed as “possessed women” (84).

The narrative represents not just the work culture of the Bahujans in the periphery but their food culture too. The toiling masses depend upon locally available and relatively cheap beef as their chief delicacy and the main source of energy. Mutton and other varieties of meat are too expensive and are rare delights (89). Such representations of the food habits, rights and work culture of the Bahujans have immense political relevance and should be contextualized in the “anti-slaughter” and “sacred cow” discourse deliberately manufactured by the Hindu right. But interestingly the narrative balances this with another description about the decaying slaughter leftover lying around after the festive seasons are over (110).

The reference here is definitely to the decaying margins too, that struggle to survive on rotten meat, invoked throughout the narrative. Mateen at his best could ever hope for a leftover-breakfast. Cheap meat, obviously rotten is the daily intake, that couldn’t even slightly support in the daily toil at the loom and in the open. All men and women, not to mention children and the old, are under-nourished. This itself is the chief cause of infant mortality and ill health among the Bahujans.

Elitist and cultural monopoly claims are part of almost all communities in the Brahmanical society. Muslim Bahujans are not an exception. “Haji” which means one who has visited Mecca is a title with a
lot of symbolic capital attached to it. But the astonishing fact is that even
among Hajis there are specific caste demarcations. They themselves are the
most privileged, among Muslims, but they too have their internal hierarchy
which is a leftover of the ancient Brahmanical caste-tags. In the novel they
even have a cobbler Haji, "Haji Chamar" (99).

Self-mutilation is an age-old penance of Bahujans in the
Brahmanical society and an indication of their masculinity, virility, loyalty
and ultimately the symbolic acceptance of Brahmanic hegemony. The
simultaneous presence of an element of self-contempt and a seemingly
subversive sacrificial element makes this peculiar expression contradictory.
This paradox is characteristic of the subaltern ritualistic performances in the
subcontinent, especially in the south. For example, in Kerala there are
practices of fire-walking and claw-hanging, which are celebrated as
expressions of "subaltern speech and resistance" and are revived in parts of
the region with the active involvement of the Hindu rightwing organizations.
Such expressions of self-mutilation are often treated as symbolic of one's
religious commitment and affiliation. It is also practiced in Arabia and west
Asia, and the self-mutilation of Ansaris, represented in the novel, does
belong to this category. The young men in procession beat their breasts
violently to show their devotion and submission to the god and the sect, and
in material terms to the priestly elders (118).
An alternative way and culture to this hegemonic influence of Brahmanism is also suggested briefly by the narrative at the point where Mateen travels, in search of work outside Banaras to Saranath, where the Buddha delivered his first sermon. In the railway station he reads "haltingly, picking out each word" about the Buddha and his Dharma (133).

The minorities are generally afraid of the nationalist governments as well as the state and its apparatuses. That is why the politics of family planning and the related demographic discourses become sites of suspicion and terror for the voiceless and the victims of history. The "breeding other," the "hoggish" subaltern woman, the "Mlecha Yoni" in classical Brahmanic terms, is perceived as an all time deadly threat to monopoly groups. It subverts their nationalist and pseudo-majoritarian dreams and pollutes the sacred spaces of their imagined motherland. The "pig" analogy also symbolically violates and castrates the gendered subaltern subjects. That is why throughout the nationalist and elitist discourses in India one comes across the piggish/beastly and subhuman curse on the genitals of the gendered subaltern. Almost all the so called riots in India witness planned and well executed mutilations of the genitalia of the woman. This is the context in which the poor weavers of Banaras express their fears about the vasectomy project of the district administration (161).
Iqbal the son of Mateen also becomes a weaver and he alone realizes the depth of the weaver women's doom. "He witnessed his mother's silent longing for a sari right from the time he had been a child. It was shameful! A woman, in whose house saris were woven for the entire world, could not afford even an inexpensive Banarasi sari for herself, she spent all her life in cotton dhotis [...]" (229).

The narrative concludes with the beginning of a political awakening among the weavers, the collective movement of artisans and workers for an egalitarian work culture. Iqbal carries forward the productive and creative craft of his community, though his father failed in his effort to form a co-operative society (246-47).

Though the novel breaks many stereotypes and stock images by representing the diversity and plurality of the margin, some of the analogies and motifs in the narrative are marred by exoticism and banality. The act of weaving and the weaving subject are seductively aestheticized and metaphorically eternalized in a metaphysical vein, and this takes the narrative in a wanton flight far away from material ground. The attempt to represent the peripheries of the cultural geography finds its rhythm and pace in the novelist's struggle to include himself as a live character and participant in the narrative. Though critics like Rana Singh are inclined to consider this as a continuation of the Premchand tradition of representing the peasantry and the
artisan folk from closer quarters, it could be better acknowledged as an attempt to trace the subaltern voice from within the margins of the cultural milieu to which Bismillah himself belongs.

Notes

1 Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality* (NewDelhi: Oxford UP, 1994), identifies four streams in the narrative of *Godan* from the mimetic to the dialogic, along with the binaries of the village and the city. She places the text in its troubled times and comments that it defeats any explicit notion of ideology by escaping any straightforward remedies to social problems. Also see Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay, “Representing the Underdogs: Dalits in the Literature of Premchand,” *Studies in History* 18. 1 (2002): 51-80.


3 For a detailed review of the equation between Brahmanism and Hinduism, especially in the colonial/nationalist period, see Amalendu Misra, *Identity and*
Religion: Foundations of Anti-Islamism in India (New Delhi: Sage, 2005); more particularly the chapters “Vivekananda’s Hindu Regeneration Project” and “Gandhi and Political Hinduism.” Misra observes that the omnipresent ideology of Brahmanism is inseparable from ‘Hinduism’ and even the so called secular leaders are uneasy with India’s Muslim past.

Nobody asks why the buffalo contributing more than ninety percent of India’s milk resources, is not a sacred and national animal, says Kancha Ilaiah, “Cow and Culture,” The Hindu, 22 August 2002.

In his Buffalo Nationalism (Calcutta: Samya, 2004), Ilaiah argues that buffalo is the Indian mammal that has been giving us milk from the earliest settlement times onwards and the cow is an external beast that came to India along with the Aryans, exemplifying invasion and hegemony. See the Introduction of Buffalo Nationalism.


strains in the Indian tradition, and his interpretation of Buddhist philosophy is
notoriously inadequate” (15-16). Also see Paul Arthur Schilpp, “Fragments of a
Confession,” The Philosophy of S Radhakrishnan, ed., Schilpp (New York: Tudor,
1952) 10-22.

8 J Reghu, “Hindu Colonialisavum Dalitatavum,” Mathrubhumi Weekly, Aug 16

9 Uma Chakravarty, “Saffroning the Past: Of Myths, Histories and Right Wing
this exclusionary Hindu upper caste imagination of the past and the urge to engineer
the present and future as “the rise of fascist right wing brigade.” Also see her essay
“Building Consent: The Middle Classes, Violence and Hindutva” in Arslan,
Communalism in India: Challenge and Response (98-112). Gyanendra Pandey,
The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India (New Delhi: Oxford
UP, 1990) sees the divisive politics of colonialism behind this conflict. Also see
Satish Despande, “Communalising the Nation Space: Notes on the Spatial

Mehdi Arslan and Janki Rajan, eds., Communalism in India: Challenge and
Response (New Delhi: Manohar, 1994) also takes up the question of the
interrelations between Nationalism and Communalism. For instance see Gyan
Pandey, “Nationalism, Communalism and the Struggle over History” in the volume.

10 Rustom Bharucha, “Muslims and Others: Anecdotes, Fragments and
Uncertainties of Evidence,” Economic and Political Weekly 38 (2003): 4238-50,
critiques the exclusionary mode of “othering” the minorities. For a detailed


Gyanendra Pandey, “The Colonial Construction of ‘Communalism’: British Writings on Banaras in the Nineteenth Century,” in Veena Das, *Communities, Riots*
and Survivors in South Asia (94-134). The Sangh Parivar demolished the sets of Dipa Mehta’s film Water in early 2004 here. The film was about the Hindu widows of 1930s. Mehta had to complete the film in Sri Lanka later following Government restrictions in India.

20 All subsequent quotations are from Abdul Bismullah, Song of the Loom, trans. Rashmi Govind (Madras: Macmillan India, 1996).


