CHAPTER III

Revisiting the Village: *Samskara, Gramayana*

It is neither Brahman nor Shudra, a carcass, a stinking carcass. [...] A snake is also a twice born, if you happen to see a dead snake you have to perform the proper rites for it.

(*Samskara 7,19*)

O master we are mere pebbles in your hands [...] Until my death I will work in the field and serve my master.

(*Gramayana 174, 452*)

The worldview of Anantha Murthy’s *Samskara* as expressed in the first epigraph is confined in socio cultural binaries. *Samskara*’s world is characterized by its hierarchical structure that stretches from the Brahman head to the Shudra limbs following the Varna Dharma analogy of Brahmanic Hinduism.¹ With the lowest Savarna category of Shudra ends its worldview that annihilates the very existence of the real majority of people, the Dalit
Bahujans, on whose labour and surplus the whole “Vedic” system survives.

The “Antyajas” or “Chandals” are literally absent in this map of Brahmanism’s cultural nationalist geography. Even the translator A K Ramajunan in his notes elaborates/limits the scope of the low caste as Shudra. The space of Bahujans is still outside the Brahmanic/Savarna nation as well as the village, even in fictional narration done in the late sixties, almost two decades after the formation of a democratic republic. Such fictional narrations could point towards many things in the post republican socio political context. The second coming of Brahmanism’s absolute hegemony, its writing, its gaze, its epistemology and its neo nationalist world order are only some of them.

While summarizing and commenting on the critical responses to *Samskara*, Meenakshi Mukherjee also de-contextualizes the narrative from its undeniable discursive contexts of Brahmanism and patriarchy and universalizes it as an allegory of a “casteless wanderer.” According to her “the question need not be connected to Hinduism, it is a universal problem of a man who has equated himself with a particular role” and to read it the other way is “to limit it.” As a scholar who worked on this in the mid eighties with out the backup of much feminist and subaltern theoretical insights she also contributes to the universalistic appeal of the narrative. In its “cosmic and liberal” discourse even reptiles are given the status of the “twice born” (see the second part of the first epigraph), but the basic communities of
human beings are not even given the human status, instead they are condemned eternally as the “Chandals” and the “Pariah.” The text reflects this ideology through the voice of Shankaraya, the priest of Parijatapura:

According to Brahmin thinking, ‘a snake is also a twice born,’ if you happen to see a dead snake you have to perform the proper rites for it. You shouldn’t eat till you have done so. (19)

Two simple questions arise here, apart from the ideology’s explicit political implications pertaining to the denial of the very human existence of the Bahujans. These are firstly, whether outcastes will be allowed to do the last rites (which is forbidden in their own death) for this snake, and secondly, from where does the food come afterwards, that is who actually produces the food grain, tilling in the field and working in the mud? Perhaps Brahmanism could take the help of the double-speak metaphysics of its ancient “Vedic and Vedantic” texts here, of the texts that legitimized naked barbarism and hegemony. But before we go in to the details of the text it is also interesting to read the sub-text to this particular episode, the notes provided by the translator that form an apology of sort for such hegemonic discourses from the contemporary world:

Twice born; Dvija, the epithet applies not only to brahmins and the other two upper castes (kshatriya ‘warrior’, vaisya ‘tradesman’) but also to birds, snakes, various grains, and tooth
etc.- anything that may be said to have two births (e.g. birds and snakes are born as eggs and reborn from them). Snakes are considered sacred and therefore should be cremated ceremoniously. (151)

The divine-right metaphysics and the religious obscurantism of the elite classes that acquires legitimacy through writing and publication are quite evident here. The Bahujans could have a sigh of partial relief that the twice born status is also denied to the Shudras, their immediate lords and torturers, who mediate between the top and bottom (with regional variations, for instance Mahatma Phule was a Shudra) for the “Sanatana” sustenance of this most perverted power structure in human history!6 One of the fundamental tenets of the Brahmanic hegemonic discourse in India has been its metaphysics of the second birth. Dvija, the twice born, a synonym for the Brahman thus achieved ideological and strategic epistemological canonization in the post-Buddhist period through the pan-Indian metanarratives of Sanskrit through centuries of internal imperialism that could be termed as Sanskritization or Hinduization.7 It is this obscurantist and parasitic ideology of Brahmanism that is reflected in the text of Samskara. By repressing the signification of the natural human birth from the womb and genitals of the mother/woman, Brahmanism exposes its antihuman and, more specifically, anti-woman ideology. “Sthree Yoni/Neetcha Yoni/Mlecha Yoni” are common contemptuous terms used to refer
to the genitals of the mother/woman in relation to birth in Brahmanical texts and discourses, of which the *Gita* could be an iconic example, radically exposed by historians like D D Kosambi and Dalit theorists like Ilaiah. More than antihuman and anti-woman it is strategically anti-Dalit Bahujan in the most extreme sense since it condemns common people as “Shudra Yoni and Neecha Yoni” *(this is also a curse to the genitals of the gendered subaltern, the lower caste woman and the assumed lower status of the masses).* 

By taking the second ritualistic birth Brahmanism purges itself from the pollution of taking birth in the genitals of the mother/woman. Brahmans are superior to the masses who do not take the second birth, and are therefore worthy of their worship and service, so goes the discourse! But the hegemonic effect of this discourse that permeates the fabric of Indian society and culture all along the post Buddhist history is indeed disastrous.

The second superior birth that makes all the women and the subaltern the inferior other fetched Brahmanism its nationhood and its cultural geography. We might call it Hindu colonialism, a typical site of internal imperialism and hegemony. Thus Dalit Bahujans, the minorities and the women, the other of the Brahmanic imagination, have always remained outside the society and the nation, in both the pre- and post- colonial contexts of India. Path breaking attempts by the Bahujan theorists after Ambedkar, like Gopal Guru, have identified the growing hegemony in the contemporary state and civil society paradigms set up by the new and more aggressive
advocates of the second birth, the top twice born, TTB as they are called.\textsuperscript{10} The Brahmanic legacy of two births is now going national and international in the new fads of Vedic, Tantric and "exotically ethnic" eco-spiritual fantasies.\textsuperscript{11}

Despite its depiction of the decadent and rotting state of Brahmanism and its parasitic social order, the text of Samskara reiterates the notion of Brahman-centered village/world and nationhood with Shudra footmen to manipulate the masses and control the natural and "subhuman" resources of the nation. The subhumans or "Chandals" who are denied the human status are deprived of their very identity and are mere carcasses in the margins of Agraharas, villages and cultivable lands, "neither Brahmin nor shudra, but mere carcasses, stinking carcasses" in the margins of civilized existence. The gaps and silences in the representation of the real majority of the people make Samskara just another Brahmanic hegemonic text. It also becomes a hegemonic text in that it reasserts the patriarchal and hierarchical core of the Brahmanic worldview, reflected in the character of the protagonist, Praneshacharya, the high priest of Brahmanism in the Agrahara.\textsuperscript{12} Though this "round" character undergoes a series of changes and transformations in and through socialization outside his Agrahara, we see that the antidemocratic and antihuman tenets of the Brahmanic worldview are reiterated and reinstalled in this character towards the end of the narrative.

The idea is quite explicit in the subtitle given by the translator,
which suggests that it is the “Samskara” (in both senses as the “last rite” and “culture”) of a man that becomes the central theme of the novel. The woman and her Samskara is far from the imagination of the writer/translator, and it is not inappropriate to conclude that the man in question is (Brah)man, rather than man in general. We know that even human status makes sense only within the limits of the Agrahara. Women and outcastes are obviously the lost folk who are denied the basic freedoms of equality, expression, public action and the last rites. The Agrahara women are denied the right to speak in public and before the men. Thus the patriarchal and anti-subaltern ideology of “BrahManism” is explicit from the very beginning.

In the Agrahara women are literally protected and controlled by men, as per the codes of Manu. Acharya’s devotion to his bed-ridden wife too includes this problematic. He washes her body but washes himself to remove the pollution from talking to the Shudra woman, Chandri (1-2). It is not only the low castes who pollute but women of “superior birth” too are polluting to the Brahman. The woman of his own caste too is polluting in her periods, but though (Brah)men also have sexuality they are deemed to be eternally pure, unlike their own women. This is the purity-pollution riddle of BrahManism. If Brahman woman herself is polluting what is one to say about the outcastes and their women. Yet their body and labour are consumable under the cover of darkness and in disguise. See for instance the experiences of Belli and Chandri with Brahmanic males at night; and the
story invoked within the text of Sankara’s disguise for safe sex: “Sankara your great founder in his hunger for full experience exchanged his body for a dead king’s and enjoyed himself with the queen, didn’t he?”(6-7). This is only a sample of the double stance of BrahManism toward women, and subaltern women in particular. Look at the experience of Chandri the Shudra woman. The sin she committed was just to love a Brahman. “Chandri was Naranappa’s concubine. If Acharya talked to her he would be polluted; he would have to bathe again before his meal” (2).

Naranappa the anti-Brahmanic Brahman of the Agrahara is dead and rotting in the Agrahara and the pollution of the lower caste woman is preventing his last rites: “Is he a real Brahmin at all, he slept regularly with the lowcaste woman […]. A Brahmin isn’t lost because he takes a lowborn prostitute […]” (5). Thus goes the discourse of the inmates of the Agrahara regarding the purity-pollution issue. One thing is reiterated in the discourse, and it is that there are high and low births and the Brahman is of superior birth. Even drinking and eating meat comes only after low caste pollution (6). So it is not just life practice, but descent and birth too are mystified and connected to notions of religious and cultural superiority. The power of discourse operating in the Brahmanic patriarchal subordination and sexual exploitation of the subaltern women are central to the debate here. The subaltern is always blamed:
‘This whore, this seducing witch! [...] if she had not given him potions why should he push aside his own kinswoman and throw all the ancestral gold and jewels on the neck of this evil witch!’ (7)

So the lowcaste woman is a whore in the gaze of upper caste woman too. She is talked upon as seducing her male. Seductiveness of the subaltern is blamed and cursed while the real villain – patriarchal BrahManism - goes undetected.

If Brahmanic women see subaltern women as degraded and voluptuous creatures who pollute the “BrahMen,” by assuming a cultural and moral policing position, it is interesting to note the BrahMen’s own view of the low caste women:

For the first time his connoisseur eyes had the chance to appraise this precious object which did not normally stir out of the house, this choice object that Naranappa had brought from Kundapura. A real “sharp” type exactly as described in Vatsyayana’s manual of love- look at her, toes longer than the big toe, just as the love manual says, look at those breasts. In sex she is the type who sucks the male dry. Her eyes which should be fickle are now misty with grief and fear, but she looks good that way. Like Matsyagandhi the fisher woman in the Ravivarma print hung up in Durgabhatta’s bedroom, shyly
trying to hide her breasts bursting through her poor rag of a sari. The same eyes and nose: no wonder Naranappa threw away the worship stone for her, ate taboo meat and drank taboo liquor. One wonders at his daring. One remembers Jagannatha the Brahmin poet who married the Muslim girl, and his verses about the alien’s breasts. If Praneshacharya were not present, if Naranappa wasn’t lying dead right there, he would have happily quoted the stanza and expanded on it even to theses barren Brahmins. ‘To the lustful’- that is Naranappa and his like- ‘there is no fear, no shame’ as the saying goes. (8-9)

One should pay special attention to the expressions used to describe the subaltern woman as mere sex object. Though she is untouchable and deadly polluting, her body contours are watering the high priests’ mouth in lust. She is an object or commodity for his consumption. The pollution question is cleverly resolved by invoking the Matsyagandhi episode from the Mahabharata, where another high priest of Brahmanism violates an untouchable woman in a boat, under the cover of a mystical cloud. See how epic justification is summoned to legitimize this banal infatuation. Another reference brought in to make the register some what sexological and secularly erotic is that of Vatsyayana’s Kamasutra, a sexist Brahmanic treatise that tells the high priests how to “enjoy” a woman. Interestingly,
women can be categorized into various morphological "types" according to this text. There is no mention of explicit caste specifications here, and this is done precisely to enlarge women's commodity status. Another reference is to Ravi Varma's notoriously docile feminine figures that enact the choreography of colonial modernity/masculinity in a pan Indian canvas of epic and mythological BrahManism. All these instances of hegemonic gaze articulate the phallocentric and hierarchical worldview of Brahmanism that treats the subaltern/woman as a mere object of its order.

But even in such a decadent condition the anti-Brahmanic outcaste Naranappa's body is not allowed to be touched and cremated by low castes. Even in the most degraded form, the rotting body of a BrahMan should be made inaccessible to the untouchables. The politics of untouchability is nurtured on such painstaking endeavours.

'Only another Brahmin has any right to touch his body. If we let someone else to do it, we would be sullying our Brahmanhood. Yet I can't tell you go ahead with the rites. We all saw how he lived. What shall we do? What do the law books say?' (9)

Even Brahman women could not stand to see the dead body being touched by a lowcaste:
Anasuya nagged him. ‘Wasn’t Naranappa my own maternal uncle’s son? Sinner he may be. But if any lowcaste man is allowed to pick up his dead body, I’ll die of shame.’ (32)

The Brahman psyche itself is puzzling in these eternal paradoxes, yet it could not give up since power matters. This inherent contradiction of Brahmanism is again articulated by Acharya: “It is not truly brahmanical to get someone else to do what you don’t do yourself” (13). Throughout its history, it should be remembered that Brahmanism as a social institution has utilized the Dalit Bahujans to do the menial and “polluting manual works” including that of lifting their excreta. Another internal riddle of the Brahmanic legacy, concerning “lowcaste” Brahmans, or Smartas, who are the out castes within Brahmanism, is again relevant here:

The Parijatapura folk (Smartas) were unhappy over their friend’s death, but quite happy they were getting a chance to cremate a highcaste Brahmin. They were pleased because Naranappa ate in their houses with no show of caste pride.

(19)

The most striking thing here is that the Smartas are submissive to such hair splitting hierarchy, and are happy to get an opportunity to touch a dead uppercaste Brahman body. Such psychological subordination and subservient acceptance of hegemony is not visible elsewhere in history in any other power structures. The basic motifs of caste envy and greed that
separate the caste strands in an eternal hierarchy of desire have been identified by scholars like P K Balakrishanan in the context of Kerala. Brahmanism's peculiar blend of the social and the religious, the everyday and the metaphysical effected with the purpose of subordinating and exploiting the masses, has already been analyzed by Dalit theorists like Kancha Ilaiah.15

The superiority discourse of Brahmanism is based on a life of inhuman idealism and pedantic perversion driven by the principles of purity and pollution, the sacred birth and divine right theories, the semiotics of eating, dressing, social intercourse and spiritual obscurantism. According to critics like Ilaiah, it represents a denial of the organic and the human in life and of being one with nature. It is a total negation of working culture and a disgrace to human labour and toil. It condemns work as "polluting" and cunningly feeds on the surplus of the masses parasitically. A sense of hierarchy is central to it.

Naranappa's life is a typical violation of all these Brahmanic virtues. That is why he is termed as the anti Brahmanic being of the Agrahara. He eats meat, drinks liquor, sleeps and mixes with low castes and outcaste women. He demystifies sacred stories and taboos. He leads a life of sensuous and organic fulfillment. He condemns the Brahmanic ideal of life denial and pedantic perversion (20-26).
Another important silence or gap in the text in relation to the central question of cleansing and the burial of the dead is the one relating to the “Chandals” and the Avarnas. As far as the text is concerned, they do not exist at all. Even Chandri is a Shudra, the lowest in the Savarna category. Thus the mass of Dalit Bahujans are simply out of the narrative discourse. Even a casual mention of the working communities may ruin and subvert the elite claims of Brahmanism as the sovereigns of the land and its hideous hegemony built upon religious and metaphysical obscurantism. The fundamental question of whether there was nobody to cultivate, cook and clean, gets cunningly and carefully suppressed in Samskara. The text is careful to avoid asking this vital question; some ideological constraints silence such an endeavour. Thus Brahmanism is not just a fascist tendency in nationalist discourses of all variety ranging from the national freedom movement to contemporary Hindutva politics and the pseudo-secularism of the Congress and the Left, but an omnipresent and all-pervasive ideology in the cultural and socio-political discourses of literature, history, education, economics, development, the media, the cinema, music and pop culture. Here it would be worth referring to the Brahmanic camaraderie of Pillai and Nampoodiripadu in The God of Small Things for narrative instances of such double speak from the Left in the context of Kerala (see the fifth chapter).

The pedantry of life denial and the sublimated uses of chastity for social status and moral policing are other Brahmanic virtues enacted by
Acharya in *Samskara*, though he fails pathetically in this precarious double game. This ridiculous contradiction is illustrated by his commentary on classical erotic couplets from Kalidasa. Naranappa accuses him of provoking and perverting the Brahman youth (only males are allowed this literary erotic enjoyment from the great, sacred classical epics):

This man who speaks so beautifully about *Kalidasa’s women*, does he feel any desire himself? Actually Shripati had taken Belli at the river when she had come to get water, only after he had heard the Acharya speak of *Shakuntala’s beauty*. He couldn’t stand it anymore. Belli was carrying a pitcher of water on her head, the rag on her body has slipped, and as *she stood in the moon light bouncing her breasts, the colour of earth*—she’d look like Shakuntala herself. He had then personally, carnally, enjoyed the Acharya’s description.

Tonight Shripati took an inside trail and walked straight to the outcaste hutsments on the hillside. (39)

The classical Sanskrit erotica not just exoticizes the “earthen coloured breasts” of the subaltern woman but it also teaches how to consume it under cover. It is also important here to note that the whole of Sanskrit literature glorified and canonized by the nationalist discourses are explicitly anti-woman and anti-subaltern. In the epics the land and the body of the subaltern are to be conquered and consumed and kept under life-long slavery by the
cultured/civilized/Sanskritized masters. The male fantasies of the Brahmanic epics textualize the body of the subaltern as an obscure object of desire, to be violated and ordered and accommodated in the hegemonic epistemology by the highcaste male. Remember the Matsyagandhi episode from the *Mahabharatha* mentioned in the text (32). The text of *Samskara* inherits this Brahmanic “legacy” of writing the underdog and his/her body through the representations of Belli and Chandri, with their exoticized, eroticized and ready-to-consume bodies, with all the “follies and frailties of women.”

So through Acharya, Kalidasa inspires Shripati to do the archetypal act of conquering the body and the mind of the subaltern, the essential hegemonic act of Brahmanism that ensured its sustenance from Vedic times onwards. Here it is vital to analyze the representation of Belli and her body in the text. As we have seen, it inherits the tradition of epic exoticism and classical erotica, true legacies of Brahmanism. The mention of Vatsyayana earlier on in the narrative too is important in this connection. The passage quoted above (39) plays with the eroticism of the land/body-scape, with its references to the moon light, riverbanks and bouncing earthy breasts. The text has no sympathy for the woman victim, and its description of the setting is so subtly and evocatively used to make it all appear natural and normal, a mere response to nature’s call. Shripati’s Brahmanhood is temporarily suspended since he is acting and digressing under cover and Kalidasa’s “poetic justice” defends him through the sacred commentary of the Acharya.
The ideology of the text is quite explicit here. There is nothing wrong in two humans meeting and copulating. The text cannot escape from its legitimization project of the highcaste male’s violation of the subaltern woman. Where have all the purity-pollution questions gone? There is absolutely no concern shown for poor Belli, the lowcaste woman.

Thus the text not just remains silent about the subaltern existence and the struggle of the subaltern to survive, but it also tries desperately to erase and mute the cries and curses that come from underneath the conqueror’s invading legs. It legitimizes the historic wrongs and injustices done by Brahmanism to the Dalit Bahujans and the subaltern communities, and mediates to make it all instinctual and “organic.”

Another instance of legitimization and apologist representation is evident in Belli’s taking for granted the low caste’s poverty and slavery. Her epistemology and worldview is so amicably and smoothly compromising to Brahmanism’s power requirements that there is no tension whatsoever among the communities even on the question of land and property issues. It is an instance of ventriloquism, where Manu speaks through the novelist Anantha Murthy. Belli’s passive acceptance of the status quo and hegemony is her way of articulating her worldview:

She had always been like ripe ears of corn bending before the falling rain. Belli wrapping the clothes around her said:

‘Ayya, I want to tell you something, I ‘ve never seen such a
thing before. Why should rats and mice come to our poor huts? Nothing there to eat. Our huts aren’t like Brahmin houses.’ (40)

So it is natural that the Dalit woman bends before the Brahman male and normal that Dalit huts are ridden with poverty while the Brahman houses are overflowing with prosperity. So simple! The BrahMan is the lord and master of all he surveys, including the land and the living bodies that are created for his service by god!

But the problem receives clearer focus in the description of the BrahMan who can make sex with the low caste woman, but cannot talk to her: “Belli was alright for sleeping with; she was no good for talk. If she opens her mouth, she talks only ghosts and demons” (41). Bodies are useful not the brain and the tongues. Brahmanism views these other bodies not as human, but as animal. Mastering of such beastly land/body-scapes is again part of the superior Sanskritization/Hinduization discourse of Brahmanism. The brutality of this system is that not only talk and socializing are taboo in physical contact, but the subaltern has to stand self-cursedly at the lords’ doorsteps for scraps of rotten food:

Chinni begged standing at a distance: please avva throw a morsel for my mouth, avva. Sitadevi went in, brought out some betel leaf, threw them at her. Chinni tucking away the betel in her lap said. (58)
After all, Chinni is there to lift the whole family’s excreta and to wash their toilet clean! Such inhuman conditions of living make these wretched of the earth resign to their fate and submissive to hegemony. They also nurture the hope of improving their position in the caste hierarchy someday. Chandri’s desire for upward mobility in the caste hierarchy should be understood in this perspective. For a Shudra woman like Chandri even a touch of a Brahman is uplifting in these premises (67). For her class of Brahmanical subcastes of Shudras too “Chandals” are not humans, but mere beasts. The Shudra worldview too is limited within the poles of Brahman and Shudra, that is expressed in her realization that her lover is no longer present and only a stinking carcass remains, “neither Brahman nor shudra”(70). This exclusivist world could only be violated and trespassed by the Brahman male who can use any body in the touchable and untouchable categories. Consider the evaluation of body statistics of the low caste women by BrahManic youth: “They measured and judged all the lowcaste women” (73).

In the wet earth and in the warmth of the lowcaste woman (two peculiarly polluting things to Brahmanic high castes), Acharya the high priest of Brahmanic pedantry and asceticism discovers the organic and natural way of living, leaving behind his dying wife and the rotting Agrahara (80-85). Let us watch the Acharya coming out of the sex-slumber:

Something occurred to him and he got up. Like an animal with his snout to the ground, he entered the woods where he made
love to Chandri. Even in broad day light, it was shady and
dusky there. In the bushes it was quite dark, a humming dark.
He stood at the place where his life had turned over. The
weight and shape of their bodies still visible on the green grass.
He sat down. Like an idiot, he pulled out the blades of grass
and smelled them. He had come from the death stench of the
agrahara; the smell of grassroots smeared with wet earth held
him in its power like an addiction. Like a hen pecking at and
raking the ground, he pulled at everything that came to his hand
and smelled it. (83)

A movement away from the inward-looking and narcissistic ideology and
epistemology toward an organic epistemology that inculcates the growth and
reproduction of the earthly beings and the virtues of the work culture could
be identified easily in this passage. It seems to mark the beginning of
Praneshacharya's second birth, that takes him out of his twice-born
metaphysics. From here till the end the narrative presents the image of a
wandering Brahman outside his agrahara. In his escapist bouts with Putta, an
idler, outside his village the Acharya observes the world around and learns a
lot about it. But even after his encounters with the outer world, his mind is
disturbed to see lowcaste women. On seeing Padmavati he sweats, since she
was a Malera, "a half caste woman"(122). But still he registers her bodily
statistics;
Acharya stood up and looked at Padmavati, long hair, not yet oiled after a bath, plump fleshy thighs, buttocks, breasts, tall, long limbed. A gleam in the eyes an expectation. A waiting. Must have a ritual bath in the river after her period. Breasts rise and fall as she breathes in and out. They will harden at the tips if caressed in the dark. (124-25)

At this advanced stage of the narrative there would not be any doubt about the real transformations of this character. He is still the personification of caste/gender prejudices and its divided worldview. Even after his intimate sexual relations with the low caste woman Chandri, his sexist attitude towards women and the world in general has not changed. Even after experiencing the decadence of rotting Brahmanism, his caste consciousness and pollution-phobia persist. As an icon and victim of Varnadharma this BrahMan cannot become a man. Or his BrahManism makes its second coming or rebirth even after his organic initiation in to the human way of living. He is “twice-born” in the sense that he takes his second birth into an exclusionary world of pseudo-superiority based on religious and metaphysical obscurantism and ideological exploitation through the instrument of caste and perpetuates the power discourses of hegemony.

At this point the real question of giving up cultural superiority and social hegemony has been apologetically concealed and marginalized in the text with an equation that says either Brahmanism or chaos: “Unless I shed
bhrmanhood altogether I cannot stand aside, liberated from all this, if I shed it, I’ll fall into the tigerish world of cock-fights” (130-31). This apology for the rebirth, this characterization of the non-Brahmanic Dalit Bahujan cultures and worldviews as mere “cock-fight,” its essential contempt for the basic communities and their work cultures can hardly conceal Brahmanism’s fear of the loss of hegemony.

Things are not much different in Rao Bahaddur’s Gramayana which is also set in another good old South Indian village. The Karnataka village in Gramayana could easily pass for the marginalized other of the urban Indian city-centre. But a close look at this narrative of the village mythology would expose the hollowness of the reductionist dichotomy. It reveals the plight of the really marginalized and eternally subjected within this so called periphery, problematizing the whole debate of rural, subaltern post coloniality manifesting along caste and gender lines. Padalli is a typical “caste-swaraj” Indian village with its inscribed and unwritten constitution of caste hierarchy, life long bonded slavery and gender oppression. Patriarchy and Brahmanic priesthood operate here in tandem in order to squeeze and victimize the lower castes and women in general. The picture of the sexed subaltern is worse.

As is the case with the history of all Indian villages, Padalli’s history has been appropriated or hijacked by Sanskrit Brahmanic consolidation and nomenclature. It, according to sacred legend originates from Parasurama
Padalli(village). And no doubt Brahmins were its chosen owners!

Colonialism, kingship and feudalism, along with Brahmanic priesthood and cultural monopoly, choke the land (1-3). The mansion of Jagirdar, the male head of the village, cleric Kulkarni, priest Acharyar and Brahmanic monk Padadappa along with a series of royal police men literally constitute the patriarchal frame work of the village. Chimana, the sister of Dada, the central figure, becomes the victim of this illegitimate collusion between patriarchy and priesthood. Hundreds of outcastes who live on the margins of the village form the basic working class and the fundamental victims of this economy. The river Krishna forms the backdrop of this agrarian society and finally washes off the margins to doom. Even after this holocaust the master-slave relation and hierarchy is reestablished and caste disequilibrium is re-balanced through Kariappa showing signs of the beginning of a new era of life long slavery in the fields, a typical revival and reestablishment of hegemony. This reinstating and reinforcing of the hegemonic world view and the ancient antihuman power relations makes Gramayana a subservient text of the dominant Brahmanical ideology.

Pulaya, shepherd and cobbler slums are the real margins of this village. They are outside the great entrance of the village and their settlements, movement, speech and activity are restricted and they face the threat of being further pushed to the periphery by the floods. The narrative mentions them always with a caste prefix unlike the Savarna lords with
surnames and other tales and titles. The sex workers of the village are exclusively from the Pulaya slum. The Pulayas are in charge of taking the carcasses to the periphery of the village for burial. All other menial jobs as well as productive work are their 'natural' duty.21

The narrative adds abusive epithets to the outcastes like “Madigar” and “cobbler.” Their women are mere sex objects and nothing more than “whores.” See this typical female/subaltern representation: “His (Channna’s) sister, that s/iit Malli who is left for the service of God was also there with the end of her saree in her teeth, swaying her hips, and peeping from behind the corner” (149). The village “whores” are exclusively confined to the subaltern slums. Chandri is a typical Devadasi (242). (See pages 243-44 for an elaborate “whore” representation.) This exclusionary and contradictory nature of the Pulaya slum and Padalli village provides a striking parallel between the caste ethics of Varnasrama Hinduism and its social manifestation of pandemonium, in the experience of the basic working castes and communities.

When the famine strikes the village because of the hoarding of grains by the upper castes, the Dalits become the real victims of it. They starve to death, they fall prey to the poisoned and decayed maize that was given away at the time of calamity.

The untouchables were merely exploited by the Brahmanic monk Padadappa and mobilized for illegal and criminal acts at this critical juncture.
of calamity. Their thinking and action, everything is controlled and manipulated from the top, that is from the Brahman head, exactly as the Varnasrama ideology demands. They address the upper castes as “master/lord” and consider it their duty and privilege to serve and die for the feudal lords and caste superiors: Pulaya Rudra says to the lords: “O master we are mere pebbles in your hands” (232).

It is not only the outcastes and Dalits who are misrepresented in the narrative. Members of minority religions too are presented as grotesque and comic/ridiculous in the rustic village saga that exposes the xenophobia and hatred of the other in traditional Hindu societies and villages. Jain Jinnappa is always frugal, eccentric, and useless. He is the butt of ridicule in the narrative (274-87).

The female representations of the narrative explicitly assert the patriarchal and oppressive gender balance of such societies. All the women are subservient to their “lords” (husbands). Chimana is the typical victim of patriarchy and Brahmanic priesthood. She was molested and ruined by Padadappa the priest, the head of the Hindu monastery in the village. But the remarkable point is that from the moment of losing her “chastity” she is condemned to live a degraded life by her own brother, the heroic protagonist Dada. The response of the villagers to her victim-hood is even worse. She is forced to spend her life ever after with Padadappa in his monastery, which is the den of drug addicts and perverted escapists. To resist the advances of
Lingappa, a stooge of Padadappa, she immolates herself, leaving the child born in wedlock, an orphan. She is only a representative of women suffering under Hindu patriarchy in such good old rural Gram-swaraj.\textsuperscript{22}

Though the narrative reflects the harsh realities of patriarchy, corrupt and hellish priesthood and caste hierarchy in the village, it assumes a detached neutral tone, rather than a polemical one. The notions of caste hierarchy and the subhuman plight of the outcastes are acknowledged by the text as normal and natural.

Another aspect of the narrative is the preponderance in it of descriptions concerning upper caste households and characters, and specifically of men from such environment. Men are the central figures in the narrative as well as in the village, despite the fact that the work they do is nothing more than gossip, sex and pooja; of course, they are the ones who hoard and consume the grains produced by the working communities. Balacharyar, the Brahmanic priest, is a typical example. Acharyar occupies the central position in the socio-cultural and religious realms of the village, like Praneshcharyya in \textit{Samskara}. The narrative, especially in the latter half, meanders around him. The omniscient narrative is tempted too often to adopt the “reserved and reverent” perspective of the “mature” Brahmanic patriarch, as the finale of floods approaches. Another important feature is that for onward motion and linear as well as lateral progression of the plot the narrative pushes on with the upper caste households and characters and the
multitudes of outcastes are mere pawns in the hands of the caste Hindus, but they are fated to face the calamities of the lords’ handiwork, whether it be floods, famine or epidemic. Actually it is the parasitic existence of the caste Hindus that complicates the economic equations of the village that is visited frequently by epidemics like malaria and plague. Food poisoning and starvation deaths too are the result of the misrule of the caste lords.

But the narrative places a metaphysical and fundamental oppressive text that theorized caste system - the *Gita* - in the hands of Acharyar to kindle a spark of hope and survival at this advanced stage of wreckage. Only revivalist Hindu solutions are sought for this fundamental flaw in the system. The suggested path of mystic and religious revival instead of rational enquiry in confronting economic and social issues leads to further ruins. But unfortunately the sufferers in greater quantity form the outcastes on the periphery. But their tragedy is not even fully mentioned. The narrative focuses on the impact of the rain and floods on the caste Hindus, especially on the Acharyar family. Even in death the outcastes are anonymous and are outside the boundaries of the village that survived for generations on their labour, as well as outside the margins of the narrative that carefully or conveniently represses the people’s greater calamity. This is a typical instance of the ideological avoidance of the fundamental labour and productive culture in the narratives that boast about portraying the “culture” of the rural, “self sufficient” Indian-Hindu villages. The masses on whose
toil and hardship the nation survives are always outside the margins of discourse. Whenever cultural discourses talk about margins they are playing the double game of avoiding and muting the real margin, the original subaltern, from the discourse and replacing the imaginary nation and fiction with their favourite caste Hindu Acharyars and their henchmen. The real inhabitants and owners of the land, the productive castes and classes, are sidelined in such narratives.

Continuing with this upper caste affiliation the narrative of Gramayana goes on to add that while thousands merely “die” in the floods, Acharyar enters “Jalsamadhi”! It too is unforgettable that even amidst epidemics like plague all kinds of manual and menial work are carried out by the Dalits: Pulaya Rudra is asked to set fire to the uppercaste household after the family dies of plague. The subalterns are forced to do the burial as well as sanitation among the epidemic-infested households. While upper caste Hindus enjoy the advantage of higher topographic location in the village, the outcastes of the margin are washed away by the rising waters of the flooding Krishna.

But what is most remarkable is the end of the novel. Even after the extensive natural calamities that killed thousands and literally swept away the Padalli village, the new dawn after this purgation presents a renewed master-slave “organic” bond. Dada the caste Hindu lord and Kariappa the Pulaya slave are back and “naturally” the slave reasserts his loyalty to the young
caste lord: “Am I not serving my master [...] as long as I live”(595). That reiterates the whole story. The hierarchy is thus reestablished, the power structures remain intact, and there is no threat to the status quo. No end to caste/gender hierarchy and hegemony. The unending saga of the Indian village goes on.

Notes

1 The Gita verse beginning “Chaturvarnyam Mayasrushtam...” and the Manusmruti could form fundamental references here.

2 See Sumit Sarkar, “Indian Nationalism and the Politics of Hindutva,” Making India Hindu, ed. Ludden D (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1997) and Beyond Nationalist Frames: Post Modernism, Hindu Fundamentalism, History (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2002) for detailed explications of the Brahmanical imagination of the Indian nation with its typical “others” and outcastes. Also see Sundar Sarukkai, “The Other in Anthropology and Philosophy,” Economic and Political Weekly 32 (1997):1406-09, that affirms the validity of fiction as an important tool for socio cultural and ethnographic data and a fundamental epistemological site. The notion of the politics of fiction as related less to the thematic content and more to the ideological connotations it acquires in the process of reading in material discursive contexts, and the idea of generic and intrinsic affiliation of fiction to the


4 See Satish Deshpande, “Communalising the Nation-space: Notes on Spatial Strategies of Hindutva,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 30 (1995): 3220-27, for an elaborate account of the Neo Brahmanical spacing strategies in post Independent India. Also see his “Hegemonic Spatial Strategies: The Nation Space and Hindu Communalism in Twentieth Century India,” *Subaltern Studies XI: Community, Gender and Violence*, ed. Partha Chatterjee and Pradeep Jeganathan (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2000) where he identifies the various ways in which Hindutva tries to redefine the nation space through rearticulating the link between an imagined community and its territorial domain, concluding by looking at Hindutva

and globalization as spatial strategies.


6 For a brilliant analysis of the perverted and exploitative aspects of Brahmanism see Uma Chakravarti, “Conceptualizing Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India:
where she identifies caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy as the organizing
principles of the Brahmanic power structure.

7 See *Manudharma Sastra*, or *Laws of Manu*, trans. George Buhler (Delhi: M B D,
1984) for the notorious “Sanatana Laws” of Brahmanism.

(Calicut: Jansakti, 1989) 51-80; specifically the section “Socio Economic Aspects
of the Gita,” for a detailed analysis of the economic and political functions that the
Gita served for the Brahmanic hegemony in India. Kosambi exposes the irrational
nature of the discourses of Brahmanism and the role of the Krishna figure in
securing ideological subordination and consent construction from the masses.

Kosambi also identifies the affinity of the Brahmanic leaders of Indian nationalism
(Tilak, Gandhi and Patel) to the text of Gita and their various appropriations and
interpretations of it, reiterating its canonical status. The legacy of this hegemonic
hermeneutics can also be traced back to Sankara, Ramanuja, Jnanesvar and
Aurobindo. For a discussion of the Brahmanic revisionist intervention in the epics
and popular cults, see “The Possible Sources of the Gita,” *Combined Methods in
Indology and Other Writings: D D Kosambi*, ed. B Chathopadhyaya (Delhi; Oxford

9 Luce Irigary, “The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine,”
*Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michel Ryan (London:
Routledge, 2000) 34-53. Gayatri Spivak’s notion of the gendered subaltern could
form a theoretical basis for the debate on this question carried out in the Indian


11 The perpetual reductionism/avoidance/silence and a sort of apology for caste-consciousness and a tactic foregrounding of the “tribal” appearing in the contemporary celebrated eco authors like Vandana Shiva and Ramachandra Guha could be referred to here. See Ramachandra Guha, An Ecological History of India (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2002).

13 G Arunima, “Face Value: Ravi Varma’s Portraiture and the Project of Colonial Modernity,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 40, 1 (2003): 57-80. This paper explores the portrait genre as the modular form in Ravi Varma’s oeuvre, and pursues the question of modernity in his art. It argues that unlike the other artists of nineteenth century India, his modernity is not a product of ‘critique’ but of a different negotiation with both tradition and the west without even slightly disturbing patriarchal and hierarchical hegemonies.

14 P K Balakrishnan, *Jatiyavastitiyum Kerala charithravum* (Kottayam: NBS, 1986). Balakrishnan explores the socio cultural and economic history of Kerala along with the history of the caste system and explicates the desire and envy that is peculiar and central to the sustenance of caste in a hierarchical form, with each caste nurturing this desire and envy for the upper caste and contempt for the lower caste. Poets like Kumaran Asan too had pointed out the envious core of the caste earlier on in the initial decades of the twentieth century in the context of the Kerala renaissance.

For a comprehensive account on the purity pollution riddles of Brahmanism, see Ghanshyam Shah, introduction, *Caste and Democratic Politics in India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003) 5-27.

Gail Omvedt, “Pseudo Secularism,” *The Hindu* 20 &21 January 2003, exposes the hidden Brahmanic and Hindutva ideologies in operation in the National movement, in the Congress and in the Communist Marxist Left. Kancha Ilaiah also points to the disguised and hence more dangerous attitude of the left in “Brahmanism vs Dalitism: The Epistemological Conflict in History,” quoting Kanshi Ram that BJP is a green snake in white grass, while the CPM is a green snake in green grass. M N Srinivas’s less celebrated essay “Gandhi’s Religion” also registers the contradictions in Gandhi’s choice of the Gita and his doctrine of non violence; see M N Srinivas, “Gandhi’s Religion” *Economic and Political Weekly* 30 (1995): 376.


For example, consider the notorious legend of the sixty four Brahman villages of Kerala and the myth of Parasurama creating Kerala by just throwing his axe across the ocean. This hegemonic myth survives in twenty first century Kerala, in the guise of the Sanskritized naming of public properties and strategic spaces, as in the “Parasuram Express.” Whether it is trains, toilets or universities, all of them carry Brahmanic Sanskritic names. Even in Kerala, a state that has achieved universal
literacy and high human development standards; through subaltern anti caste movements and missionary efforts, one would come across universities in the names of Sankara and Gandhi but a university in the name of Ayyankali, Appachan or even Narayana Guru is a remote possibility. This itself is a typical instance of hegemony growing in the public sphere and polity even in the twenty first century. We know about the decades-long struggle that preceded the renaming of Marathwada University as Ambedkar University in Maharashtra. For a detailed account of the neo Brahmanic/Savarna naming strategies in the Kerala context see B R P Bhaskar, “Kavyabhavanayum Charithrasatyavum,” Kalakaumudi Weekly 1264 (1999): 43-45.


21 See Kancha Ilaiah, “Cow and Culture,” The Hindu, 25 October 2002, for a detailed analysis of the polluting duties of Bahujans in India, and the role of the Brahmanic double speak in making them polluting. Ilaiah’s essay also throws light on the persistence of the exploitation in several parts of present-day India. Also see S Anand, “Thyagaraja’s Cow,” Outlook 35 (2003): 58-9, that subverts the sanctity of Indian classical music, especially Carnatic music, that has been patronized and monopolized by Brahmanism. Anand points out that the sound of the mridangam is the outcome of Dalit Bahujan leather craftsmen and that “mridangam cant be mridangam sans cow hide.” The irony is that Brahmins who are the “most touchy” about the cow’s divinity have to run their fingers on a slaughtered cow’s hide to produce music.
22 Actually throughout its history Brahmanism in south India has not only used the muzzle power of Bahujans to expand the Varna social system, but has exploited their sexuality too to build the caste-swaraj villages. For example in Kerala they constituted sexual colonies among the Shudra women. See P K Balakrishnan, *Jativyavastayum Kerala Charithravum* (Kottayam: NBS, 1986) and Robin Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nayar Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore; 1847-1908* (New York: Macmillan, 1976). The sexual act too has immense significance in constituting hegemony. The sexual act is a site for gender/cultural domination of the male and for the proving of “biological” and physical superiority, as Maurice Godelier argues in “What is a Sexual Act?,” *Anthropological Theory* 3. 2 (2003): 179-98. Even after centuries things are not much different in India; for example see the patriarchal and Brahmanic core of the Left who are supposed to be sensitive to gender issues, articulated by Biswamoy Pati, “Women, Rape and the Left,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 26 (1991): 219-20.

23 Typical narrative instances of the selection of premises, foregrounding and back grounding are attributives of the propaganda model of the power groups, say Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (London: Vintage, 1994) Preface xv; “Observable pattern of indignant campaigns and suppressions, of shading and emphasis, and of selection of context, premises, and general agenda is highly functional for established power and responsive to the needs of major power groups.”