Cultural Politics of Gender, Caste, Class and Religion: 
Reading Marginality in *Seven Sixes Are Forty Three* 

**Culture: A Contested Category**

Cultures are not just creative, they are also
‘Contested terrains’, sites of struggle.

In idealist theory, ‘culture’ is envisaged as a repository of some excellent values. It is considered as sacred, and an inner standard of excellence and antidote to class unrest. Its importance lies in creating social order and cohesion in society. And the pursuit of culture, it is believed, leads to enlightenment and self realization. The nineteenth century British poet and culture critic, Matthew Arnold in his polemical text, ‘Culture and Anarchy’ wrote:

> Culture seeks to do away with classes; to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere; to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light, where they may use ideas, as it uses them itself, freely – nourished and not bound by them.
> This is the social idea; and the men of culture are the true apostles of equality. The great men of culture are those who have had a passion for diffusing, for making prevail, for carrying from one end of society to the other, the best knowledge, the best ideas of their time. (Arnold 1869: 44)

Culture, according to Matthew Arnold, offers us all the means to realize human nature to the full by developing our intellectual, moral and aesthetic capacities. For Arnold, ‘reading, observing and thinking were said to be the means towards moral perfection and social good. Culture as the form of human ‘civilization’ is to be counterpoised to the ‘anarchy’ of the ‘raw’ and uncultivated masses’. As such, Arnold’s aesthetic and political arguments are justifications for what we commonly call ‘high culture’ (Barker 2008: 40) and ‘the culture of the leisure class is proclaimed as a universal culture’ (Sinfield 2005: 2).

Arnold’s idealist and even elitist view of culture, the pursuit of which is supposed to lead to spiritual perfection, comes under attack on so many fronts.

Arnold’s notion of culture remains an ideal rather than a part of actually existing societies. This view of culture is completely unhelpful for answering such questions as ‘how culture is made’ or ‘how it affects people’s everyday life’. Commenting on Arnold’s elusive
notion of ‘culture’, British Marxist critic Terry Eagleton notes in his book, The Idea of Culture:

The Arnoldian sense of culture as perfection, sweetness and light, the best that has been thought and said, seeing the object as it really is and so on, is embarrassingly imprecise..... (Eagleton 2005: 32)

In addition, Arnold’s understanding and conceptualization of culture being focused exclusively on the ‘high’ cultural and academic traditions of Art and History, tends to exclude and marginalize the working-class experiences and their popular cultural forms. The oppressed groups in a given society and their bitter experiences of structural inequality such as sexism, racism and casteism in Indian context – their effects on people’s sense of self and their opportunities in life – remain beyond the purview of Arnold’s sense of culture. As we all are familiar with the fact that such institutions of structural inequality and hierarchy as caste, class, race and gender are social constructions but they are also lived as brute facts. In any given social set up such cultural institutions act not only as the breeding ground of social inequality and oppression, but also justify and legitimate violent cultural practices. In the face of degrading and brutal practices of colonization, slavery, discrimination and exploitation based on the fabricated and vicious ideologies of caste, class, gender and race, the liberal humanist conception of culture seem to be nothing less than sterile litanies and fraudulent idealism. Culture – traditionally conceived as a source of shared ethical values and mechanism of character formation – has also become an apparatus of violence, oppression, exclusion and deprivation.

In the wake of contemporary cultural studies, a paradigm shift has taken place regarding the nature, function and significance of culture. The political dimension of culture and its camouflaged nexus with the ‘power’ have come to the fore-front. The liberal humanist claim that ‘cultural values are universal’ and ‘transcend political interest’ is no longer considered to be a tenable position. ‘Culture is a zone of contestation in which competing meanings and descriptions of the world have fought for ascendancy and the pragmatic claim to truth within patterns of power’. (Barker and Galasinki 2001: 56). Culture is understood as ‘the signifying system through which necessarily a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored’. (Williams 1981: 80)
The issue of cultural representation is inescapably a political one. Such acts as naming, creating official versions and legitimating social world etc. have deep political concerns and implications. (adapted from Barker and Galasinki 2001: 56). Drawing on the resources of symbols and images, we make sense to our eyes or mind. However cultural symbols and images have deep political connotations and ‘often politics is conducted through and against symbolism and imagery, rather than through rational debate or physical conflict (Longhurst and Smith 2011: 146). In any given social setup, certain versions of culture of certain people are considered as official ones while those of others’ are subordinated. Certain images of social life are projected while others are marginalized. Voices of certain sections of people are heard while those of many others go unheard or silenced. Such situations of socio cultural dominations are secured and reproduced through the practices of such cultural institutions as caste, class, family, religion, media etc. It would not be an exaggeration to say that to a certain extent social inequality and hierarchy are legitimated through the products and practices of cultural institutions. Such institutions construct and reproduce cultural traditions and heritage working on the principles of inclusion and exclusion though projected as the creator of universal truth and values, they actually protect and privilege the interest of certain dominant sections of people in a given society and exclude that of many marginalized others’. As such, ‘there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism’ (Benjamin 1992: 248). Thus, it can be suggested that no cultural practice can be separated from politics, which is nothing else but a realm of contested power-relations.

**Power: A Cultural Construction**

Everything in social and cultural life has fundamentally to do with power. Power is at the centre of cultural politics. It is an integral to culture. All signifying practices – that is, all practices that have meaning – involve relations of power.


As per the widely held traditional view, the term ‘power’ is considered as a coercive force. It maintains itself in the form of domination, prohibition, brutality and constraints. Power is ‘that which lays down the law, which prohibits, which refuses and which has a whole range of negative effects: exclusion, rejection, denial, obstruction, occultation etc. (Foucault 1980: 183)
However, ‘power’ does not signify simply a negative force, which only concerns itself with imposing limits on human subject. There is an alternative view of power, which plays a very productive, constitutive and enabling roles. In this mode, power acts as a mechanism through which social-order is produced and maintained power is key to the formation of human subjectivity and gives us various subject positions in society. In the work of Michel Foucault, power constitutes one of the three axes constitutive of subjectification, the other two being ethics and truth (Wolfreys 2005: 306).

Reflecting on the nexus between the productive nature of power and the formation of human subjectivity, Foucault remarks:

if power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only, weigh on us as a force that says no, but it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression (1980: 119).

Power is integral to culture. Rather power is constituted in cultural ways. Certain signifying practices – which a culture consists of – involve hierarchical relations of domination and subordination. In a given social set-up, cultural powers and positions enable some individuals to realize particular possibilities while others are denied. Certain identities are more privileged than others. Certain versions of history and cultural representations carry more weight than others. On the top of all these, what is more menacing is that the cultural constructions of personhood often constitute an objecthood: they define some people from the outside in, painting them as inferior or superior, assigning them a social value that stigmatizes’ (Parish 2008: 7). Human subjects are “sealed in that crushing objecthood” created by the images of others (Fanon 1967: 7).

In Indian context, the cultural institutions of caste and their violent, coercive and hierarchical functionings, are deeply imbricated with the various modes and manifestations of power. Reflecting on the disguised nexus between the power and functioning of the caste system, Steven M Parish, a distinguished caste analyst, notes:

In sum, a hierarchy constituted by power (the king and state) fuses in experience and in practice with a ritualized hierarchy constituted in terms of purity and impurity with a moral
hierarchy of action and knowledge, of sin, virtue, and fate, and with a religious hierarchy of proximity to sacred values and access to spiritual power. In my view, caste hierarchy is all these, locked together in a dynamic propelled by struggles for domination and emancipation.

Contemporary critics and theorists see ‘power’ as central to the colonial and post colonial cultural production. How certain images of places and cultures become dominant and even hegemonic, presupposes the power to produce such images. The West’s construction of the ‘Orient’ as its inferior other – the central organizing theme of Edward Said’s landmark book ‘Orientalism’ (1978) – is created and reinforced through the strategies of essentialization, exoticization, totalization and orientalization.

We see the convergence of three distinct trajectories in Western thought ….. First there is the urge to essentialize ….. This essentialism, which has a complicated genealogy going back to Plato, became for some Orientalists the preferred mode for characterizing the “other” ….. The second tendency involves exoticizing, by making differences between “self” and other the sole criteria for comparison ….. The third trajectory involves totalizing, that is, making specific features of a society’s thought and practice not only its essence but also its totality. Such totalization probably has its roots in the German romanticism of the early 19th century and comes to us in all the variations of the idea of the Geist (spirit) of an age or a people. Canonized in Hegel’s holism, its most important result was the subsequent Marxian commitment to the idea of totality, but it also underlies Dumont’s conception of the “whole”. (Appadurai 1992: 39).

Such colonial strategies of domination and control – essentialization, exoticization and orientation etc. – have been extended to study the dominant discourses of patriarchy, caste-hierarchy and class hegemony to create the effect of ‘othering’ amongst women, low-caste-actors and the struggling-working class commoners respectively. Cultural studies, an interdisciplinary study, tends to focus on the examining the intricate relations of culture and power. ‘The forms of power that cultural studies explores are diverse and include: gender, race, class, colonialism etc. Cultural studies seeks to explore the connections between these forms of power and to develop ways of thinking about culture and power that can be utilized by agents in the pursuit of change (Barker and Galasinki 2001: 25)

Towards the end, it can be suggested that we cannot reduce culture to power, yet power has a big ‘say’ in creating the cultural hegemony. Although cultural formation – is
always more a system of coercive domination, yet ‘hegemony is an expression of the power

to make culture. Dominant groups seeks to shape and dominate consciousness through the
cultural production, legitimation, control and diffusion of values, symbols and meanings,
creating a sense of reality that reinforces, ethicizes and naturalizes social practices that
“position” social actors in relation to each other’ (Parish 2008: 230). Thus, it may be
suggested that power is not something that stands outside of culture rather its presence is very
much within the culture and constitutes it.

**Subjectivity: A Site of Struggle**

The destination of all ideologies is the subject. The subject is what speaks
or signifies, and it is the role of ideology to construct people as subjects.
Catherine Belsey, Critical Practice (2001: 54)

Concepts of ‘subject’ and ‘subjectivity’ have acquired a very crucial status in
contemporary critical enterprises. In common usage the term ‘subjectivity’ is primarily
understood as a person’s perception of the self and that of others. It is constituted by and
mediated through language, culture and society. ‘A subject is a self in language; subjectivity
is the process of attaining and expressing selfhood in and through language or the location of
the self situated and subjectified by cultural, epistemological, ideological and other social
discourses and institutions’ (Wolfreys 2005: 308-9). Now the term ‘subject’ rather than ‘self’
has become preferable one as the later implies an autonomous, unified, individual and fully
formed before entering into the symbolic order of language and culture. It also connotes
ahistorical and an essentialistic character of itself. The term ‘subjectivity’ signifies the
process of the socio historical conditions of being a person. ‘Thus, historical and cross-
cultural work suggests that the resources that form the material for personhood are the
language and cultural practices of specific times and places. We are born into a world that
pre-exists us and learn to use a language which was here long before we arrived. In short, we
are formed as individuals in a social process using culturally shared materials. Without
language, not only would we not be persons as we commonly understand that concept, but
the very concept of personhood and identity would be unintelligible to us.’ (Barker and
Galasinki 2001: 29)

The above given account on the terms ‘subject’ and ‘subjectivity’ should make it clear
that to be a person does not mean to be or to have a timeless, universal and ahistorical
‘identity’ or ‘essence’. Rather to be a person or a subject means being cultural all the way and
subject to specific spatio-temporal discourses of a given social order. Social structures inhere human subjectivity and have profound implications. Cultural institutions such as family, school, religion, media etc. organise individuals and govern their conduct by giving them various subject positions, which are located within relations of caste, class, gender, race, sexuality, nationality etc.

Now it should be obvious that if culture is a powerful fabric weaving subjectivity and identity, it is also, at the same time very much political and hegemonic in character and is an important site of resistance. As suggested in the previous two units of this paper, if a group of people/section of society feel culturally empowered, there are others who find themselves culturally excluded, stigmatized, subordinated, deprived, oppressed and exploited. Culture becomes a ground of inferiority and stigma for them. They do not stand free from the cultural attitudes of others. Confronted with the dirty, filthy and degrading images that upper-caste-actors hold of the untouchables, the later ones tend to internalise the casteist ideology of being inferior and of low-rank. They not only suffer the stigma and oppression in the hands of the upper-castes, but also bear the dominant ideology of hierarchy. Even for women (specially the rural ones and those confined to the house-hold chores) and the low-income group people have to live with and through the hierarchical and hegemonic gender and class ideologies and values, which go into organising their cultural consciousness. The hegemonic cultural orders become less naked and more insidious when they “may emerge with a vision of a meaningful existence of a moral order” (Parish 2008: 228). For instance, in certain dalit narratives the untouchable protagonist being in a state of bad faith come to the realization that they must have sinned in their past life and thus deserve the sufferings of the current one.

However, the above given account of the ‘culturally-constructed-subjectivity’ should not imply that people are absolutely constituted out of their culture and cannot escape from the external and internal constraints. If it is true to say that people internalise the hegemony of their culture, they are the ones who give it a resistance too. They are not simply passively created by their dominant culture. They reject and critique the demeaning and dehumanising cultural ideologies of caste, class, gender and race and redefine themselves, reimagine the relationship between their culture and themselves. Being not always in a state of mind to go on suffering endlessly the arbitrary social disorder and discontents of their culture which Fanon calls the ‘crushing objecthood’ (1967: 109) status, the marginalised subjectivities are
forced to respond to the threat, the challenge posed. Their subjectivities turn into sites of socio-political struggles.

**Marginality: Multiple Modes**

The term ‘marginality’ signifies a situation of being on the margin or a state of relegation to the fringe of society. It is an outcome or a consequence of the wielding power by the dominant groups or discourses. ‘The perception and description of experience as ‘marginal’ is a consequence of the binaristic structures of various kinds of dominant discourses, such as patriarchy, imperialism and ethnocentrism, which imply the certain forms of experience are peripheral …... structures of power that are described in terms of ‘centre’ and ‘margin’ operate, in reality, in a complex, diffuse and multifaceted way. The marginal therefore indicates a positionality that is best defined in terms of the limitations of a subject’s access to power’ (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1998: 135). The study of marginality has emerged as an important area of concern within the discourses of feminist, Post colonial and Development Studies. The marginality study aims at unveiling the structural and ideological sources – caste, class, gender, race, ethnicity and globalization etc. – of human suffering. In doing so, the focus is on analyzing the afflicting experiences of those whose social existence are excluded, discounted and discredited by the dominant discourses. The marginality research seeks to ‘explore the interplay of multiple forms of asymmetrical power relations in the production of human miseries’ (Chuengsatiansup 2001: 32). The marginality study reinforces the scrutiny of the ‘regime of culture’ so that its language, gender, class and caste related crude biases may come to the fore. Analysts and researchers show that the official, main-stream hegemonic cultural discourses functions more as a controlling and crushing mechanism for the marginalized sections of the society, rather than protecting and prioritizing their interests. In other words, the role of cultural machinery that creates, sustains and validates subjection, come under investigation.

It may further be maintained that the concept ‘marginality’ refers to a distinct but an overlapping set of social, political, economic, geographical and historical conditions. The marginalized groups may be deprived of economic resources or may even be suffering from poverty, starvation. They may even be being haunted by the stigma of dirty locality and meagre belongings. According to Amartyasen, an Indian economist and Nobel laureate, capacity-deprivation among the unskilled labourers is one of the root causes of marginality.
experienced in the developing countries. The experience of marginality may also be socio-cultural one, whereby victims may be having low self-esteem, social denial, symbolic denigration and even be receiving the reified, objectivised treatment. In addition, forced migration and displacement, unemployment, ill-health, political persecution, social alienation, non-integration, identity-crisis, illiteracy, colonization, capitalism and globalization are the various other factors leading to the experience of marginalization. At times, the experience of marginality appears to be caused by a single factor, while its interrelation with other factors remain inexplicit. Marginalization and its experience indeed is composite and accumulative one. Hence, marginality, it may be suggested, operates in its multiple modes. ‘Within the interactive social process it is historically rooted, culturally legitimized and politically conditioned. In the functioning of the society, marginality has remained ideologically linked to the various institutions of caste, race, class, ethnicity and patriarchy; and substantially coupled with the arrangements of social segregation ... economic exploitation and political subordination (Singharoy 2010: 12).

The contemporary school of ‘subaltern studies’, it may be suggested, has the similar overriding concern to recover and provide agency to the poor and the outcaste, as it is a case with the ‘marginality studies’. The word ‘subaltern’ refers to a group of people occupying a subordinate position in a social hierarchy ‘expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way’ (Guha 1983: 1). The subaltern people stand structurally excluded from the dominant discourses and they have to bear the brunt of injustice and inequality, denial, deprivation etc. They even lack history and a voice of their own to articulate their position and register their protests.

In the preceding sections, an attempt has been made to probe how culture – the very fabric and substance of human subjectivity – is political, hegemonic and hierarchical system of domination, operating on the principle of high and low, exclusion and inclusion. The structures of inequality and repression are produced, sustained and even validated by and through the mechanism of such cultural institutions as caste, class, gender, race, religion etc. for the oppressed and marginalized sections of society, culture plays a very prominent and paramount role in constituting their inferior sense of themselves and they tend to internalize and identify with the meanings and values of the cultural order in such a way that they find them as inviolable and cannot see their political origin and arbitrariness. The literary-cultural texts and artifacts, products of such hegemonic cultural order, constituting a ‘a great tradition
of art and literature', are considered to be transcending politics and history. Thus, the dominant cultural constructions, meanings and values – product of existing power relations – tend to engender and transform the major chunk of people in a society as the marginalized who are more often than not at the receiving end. As a consequence these people by virtue of assimilating and imbibing these cultural values and ideologies, though not necessarily take them as universal truths and expression of fixed and recognizable human nature.

In the context of the above theoretical delineations, Kiran Nagarkar’s seminal novel Seven Sixes Are Forty-Three – primarily concerned with the articulation of power relations and hierarchies – has been critically examined. It has been shown that the text’s protagonist, Kushank Purandre and various other characters representing various sections of their society, have been marginalized by the dominant culture. In the text the representation and misrepresentation of the issues pertaining to caste, class, gender and religion are at the fore of Nagarkar’s engagement with the cultural-politics and the ‘discontents of culture’.

II

Reading the novel

Translated in English, the text, Seven Sixes Are Forty-Three is the author’s first novel, originally published in Marathi as Saat Sakam Trechalis in 1974. The novel set in post independent Maharashtra, revolves around the protagonist Kushank Purandre, an unpublished author, living in a Mumbai chawl, who enjoys the goodwill and a host of friends, relatives and lovers. In the novel, Kushank is presented not only as a victim of the social structures and circumstances but also as a witness to the plight, struggle and desperation of a host of characters as daughters, wives, workers, untouchables, forced migrants and victims of police atrocities. In the absence of a fully coherent and linear narrative – ruptured by flashbacks and the juxta positions of scenes – readers of the text are forced to see Kushank as a unifying factor. In writing this novel, Kiran Nagarkar has drawn upon the insights of the Marathi literature, which reflects a strong social concern for the oppressed and the marginalized.

Marathi literature, whether drama, fiction or poetry, has expressed concern for the condition of people, their sufferings and poverty. The hopelessness of shanty-dwellers, the oppression of landless labourers, the position of women, the subjugation of untouchables, have all found a place in recent social realist writing. (Masselos 1981: foreword)
Kiran Nagarkar has written ‘history from below’ in this novel. His central concerns in the text are the lives, experiences, beliefs, attitudes and practices of the people who are victims of illness, starvation, death and utter hopelessness. Trapped in the extreme life-circumstances, characters in the novel undergo the experience of being broken down to the nothing. There is hardly any hope of redemption for them. It is shown that neither religion nor socio-political ideologies have answers to their problems of “illness, starvation, death, hopelessness” (Masselos 1981: foreword). Despite a gloomy presentation of reality in the novel, Nagarkar’s overriding concern is for the people of the Marathi society and their crushing realities. It is often said that a creative writer has a social conscience. He/She is duty bound to his society. Kiran Nagarkar as a cultural worker, has accentuated the plight and sufferings of the downtrodden and the underprivileged through this text. Nagarkar as a writer of the people and for the people, has assailed the constituted wrongs perpetrated through the identity categories of caste, gender, religion, class, language and ethnicity etc. Advocating his plea for the poor in the novel, he descends deep into the lowest strata of his society and lampoons the rich, the affluent and the powerful.

Through this literary cultural exploration, Nagarkar has not simply given a powerful representation to those who are the chief victims of structural violence, but also a voice to ones who succumb to their wretched circumstances and whose sufferings, more often than not go unnoticed. Author’s concern and commitment is towards that deprived sections of his society and people, who are obliged to die in the silence of history. The text is a searing critique of the society, which generates, sustains and promotes the hierarchical and discriminatory cultural values and ideologies through the institutions of gender, caste, class, religion, language etc. and transform thereby a major chunk of people as the underprivileged and marginalized. The novel has a very moving and disturbing effect on its readers as it offers a vast panorama of poverty, alienation, desperation, injustice, violence and wretchedness of a cross-sections of people and their distressing social surroundings.

**Cultural Polities of Gender Violence**

Gender inequality, discrimination, subjugation, oppression and violence against women are all pervasive in any existing human society, specially in the groups and communities belonging to the lower strata of a society. Autocratic and arbitrary operation of patriarchal and masculine ideologies are the key markers of the power imbalance in a given
social setup. Multiple cultural, economic and educational disabilities which women have to face in a male dominated society, prevents them from leading a meaningful and dignified life. Sexual domination is the most pervasive cultural ideology and ‘sexual politics in a process whereby a ruling sex seeks to maintain and extend its power over the subordinate sex’. (Moi 2001: 26). The second sex (1949), a landmark feminist text published by a leading French philosopher and theorist, Simone de Beavoir, highlights the cultural identification of women as the ‘other’, whereas man is the dominating ‘subject’, who is considered to represent human beings in general. Another French feminist theorist and linguist, Julia Kristeva, commenting on the subordinate and marginalized position of women, writes: ‘woman as such does not exist’ (Kristeva 1977: 16). This statement may be taken to signify the view that woman cannot be represented outside the patriarchal symbolic cultural order. Moreover, ‘a woman cannot be: she can only exist negatively’ and she as a patriarchal construct can only be understood relationally and positionally. As a consequence, women are rendered as the marginal, since, she owes to the patriarchal linguistic – cultural order for her identity and existence.

The above given account should make it clear that the social structures, inherently though not essentially, are working to inferiorize and marginalize women and to make women’s conditions vulnerable to violence. Conventional, stereotypical gender roles create situations of inequality for women. It is often noticed that women are physically assaulted and subjected to mental cruelties in their own homes. Men resort to “violence as a means to reinforce their already existing social dominance”. (Adelman 2005: 193). It is further argued that wife ‘battering is a patterned process consisting of coercive and controlling behaviours including but not limited to those related to the body (such as isolation, sexual violence, physical violence) but also to ‘the mind (such as emotional abuse, intimidation and threats)’ (Adelman 2005: 194). The performance of hyper masculinity – encompassing ‘the values of strength, power, stoicism, action, control, independence, self-sufficiency, male-camaraderie, mateship and work, amongst others’ (Barker 2010: 302) – on the part of men leads to a situation wherein women and their existence and experience are perceived as peripheral and insignificant.

Kiran Nagarkar’s this novel holds a very special significance for the woman-concerns, as it foregrounds the oppressiveness of patriarchy and precarious existence of women. Much of the unsettling and painful impact of the novel is related to the plight of the women...
characters. Almost all the women are subjected to violence and ill-treatment in the text. Herein even the institutions of family and marriage work to privilege men and disadvantage women. They empower men to control their female counterparts and even entitle them (husband, father and son) to batter their wives, daughters and mothers. Nagarkar’s text suggests a pressing urgency for a fresh look of structural transformations of gender roles, ideologies, identities and relations, with a view to improve and better women’s conditions. The novel opens with a very shocking act of humiliation and violence:

He came home drunk again. Like every other day, Pratibha shut the door quickly after him. Whatever happened, however angry, terrified hopeless she felt, she would always shut the neighbours out of it all. The same of it must be contained within these four walls, always.

She cowered in a corner of the room while he swayed unsteadily in the centre, lurching out and slamming into her whenever he could make contact. At first it had been his mother. A stinging slap across her face. Pratibha had liked that. Then it was Pratibha’s turn. He’d hit her whenever he flew into a rage, with whatever came to hand, wherever he could lay his blows. (1)

The above paragraph of the novel describes an arrogant and male-chauvinist husband, Ajit’s acts of humiliation and beating of his wife Pratibha, despite her’s being a very homely and submissive. Ajit meets out the similar treatment to her mother also. Both the women remain mute spectators, robbed of their rights and dignity in their own home. Being deeply entrenched into the historically and socially constructed artificial hierarchy of patriarchy, Ajit considers his birth right to treat the women abusively and brutally. And the home wherein the women – wife and mother – have to live, instead of providing safety and security to them, has turned into a confined space of cruelty and abuse. Instead of treating Pratibha as a dignified human being and a citizen with equal human rights, Ajit intoxicated with the attitude of macho – masculinity, regards his wife as a ‘sub-human domestic worker with a body to please him’ (Barker 2010: 442, with partial adaptations). Pratibha is treated no more than as an object or a property by her husband:

Mounting her pulpy body after the thrashing would really thrill him. Spasm on spasm of dripping satisfaction. She, limply reluctant and tired, and he, worn out with all that effort. He felt like a king. Like the Lord of the whole world (1)

Being fed up with her the violent treatment meted out to her by Ajit, Pratibha raised her resisting voice, “you hit me once more and I’ll set fire to myself. I’m fed up. I hv had
enough. I don’t want to live any more”. (1) Stung with her threat, Ajit reacts quite hideously: “so who’s stopping you, you stupid bitch? Go on and do if you have the fucking guts. What are you waiting for?” (2). At her husband’s provocation and abatement, Pratibha poured kerosene over herself and lit the fire. Soon she was engulfed into red flames and her body was very badly burnt. But it was too late before the wisdom dawned upon her and she realized her folly.

Before she lost consciousness. Before they took her to the hospital. Before the police arrived. She hung on to the doctor’s arm with all her strength. And asked him again and again. Over and over. The same questions. “I want to live. Doctor, I want to live. You will save me, won’t you? They need me – my children. And my husband. He needs me too. You don’t know, do you, that he’d lost his mind and I made him all right again? He said to himself. I’m going to live, aren’t I? I’m not going to die? I don’t want to die. Never, ever. Why do you keep nodding you head? Can’t you tell me I’m going to live? I’m going to live – all the time – mornings, evening, when Anil comes home from school, when Jyotsna wets her bed – I’ll be here. Always (3)

Pratibha’s identity is deeply grounded in Indian attitude towards motherhood and marriage. She sees a woman’s value in looking after her children and her duty in adapting to her husband. That is why she even goes to the extent of forgiving her incriminating husband, ignoring the fact that it is he who is responsible for her current miserable state of affairs. “Before she went into a comma” (5) and eventually died, “she made a statement that she had tried to commit suicide because of an incurable illness” (5). Commenting on self-annihilating subjectivity of Indian woman, Prof. Veena Das, a professor in sociology, writes:

Rather than bearing a witness to the disorder they had been subjected to the metaphor they used was a woman drinking the poison and keeping it within her: just as a woman’s body is made so that she can hide the faults of her husband deep within her, so she can drink all the pain – take the stance of silence (Das 1997 : 85).

This remark made by Prof. Das, is quiet befitting in the case of Pratibha.

Mr. Kushank Purandre, the protagonist of the novel, is sent to fetch Ajit’s mother, who is staying with her brother away from her son. She is not aware of her daughter’s-in-law tragic fate. When Kushank tells her of Pratibha’s death, she expresses no sense of shock and grief. She, rather thinks that it is Pratibha who created misunderstanding between her and her son Ajit. She says: “Ajit was such a sweet boy till she arrived. He was even scared of mice
when he was a child. Still is. Then she came and turned his head. Told him nasty stories about me”. (5)

The mother thinks that Pratibha’s untimely and unnatural death is a God’s revenge upon her as she (Pratibha) was a major source of her troubles and miseries.

“So be it. Tormenting an old woman, and what did she get out of it? It’s like a judgement from heaven. God is always fair, that’s what I say. You can’t get away with it, not for ever. It comes to all of us”. (5) She even refuses to come home back to mourn Pratibha’s death.

As far as Ajit’s mother’s mental make-up is concerned, she is completely unaware of her acculturation into the patriarchal ideology, which has turned her blind-folded to see any fault in her son. On the contrary, she nurtures a strong sense of hostility towards Pratibha and believes that she (Pratibha) has had a bad influence upon her son. Ajit could have become altogether a different and better person, had his mother kept a check and vigil on his psychological formation, so that the patriarchal mores planted in him, had not taken such a bad and cruel shape.

Indian mothers, for example, routinely encourage their sons to fight every step of their way to dominant social positions and in the process turn them into aggressive oppressors. Aggressive behavior which is encouraged to be cultivated by all at home, including the women, will not be limited to men’s behavior outside home. It will eventually percolate through to their relations with their wives, daughters and even sons and other male dependents. Statistics are often cited to prove men as ‘domestic terrorists’ and to establish that women bear the brunt of their violence. (Mittapalli and Altemo 2009: VIII)

It is however to be noticed that Ajit’s mother herself being deprived of all the cultural resources and riches, that capacitate a subjectivity, she has to depend on her brother for her survival if not on her son. Thus, on account of their gendered position in the society, they – both Pratibha and her mother-in-law – have come to acquire a marginalized status.

If the malfunctioning of patriarchal ideology renders wives and mothers as peripheral and insignificant, it is equally incapacitating, constraining and insidious in the case of daughters as well. Mr. Kathavte, called ‘Bhau’ by his family members, lives in a Mumbai chawl in the neighbourhood of Mr. Kushank Purandre, the protagonist of the novel.
Mr. Kathavte, on the second floor, always felt the itch to beat his daughters at night. After ten. And he had a lot of daughters. The youngest was in the fifth standard. First he had three sons. Then he started on the daughters. He had white hair at forty and was sixty-two when his youngest daughter was born. A tough old man.

Even now, when his married daughters come to visit, the bastard has bearing sessions. To make them feel at home. At night. Only between ten and twelve. The youngest has quite a nice voice. The two middle ones have terrible voices. Rekha sounds like a vulture being dragged along the ground, and Meena is hoarse and scratchy. Her voice has stayed broken for twenty years. She started wailing in a little boy’s voice, and then it somersaulted and changed, flattened as though it had been through a sugarcane juice wringer. All of them were beaten quite impartially. (25)

When Mrs. Kathavte intervened and pleaded her husband to stop beating their daughters, she also “got her share” (26)

Once, one of his daughters named Rekha fainted due to prolonged physical assault, Mr. Kathavte says that “she was shaming” (27). Mr. Kathavte would be totally unmindful of the fact that “the yelling and screaming” (27) resulting from his act of beating his daughters, might be disturbing his neighbours. Anna, a neighbour being upset at Mr. Kathavte’s routine battering of his daughters, would finally appear, “Kathavte, that’s enough for now, Kathavte. Give it a rest, and let us all get some sleep. She is getting too old for this; she’s a big girl now”. (27) Even Kushank is moved by the pitiable lot of Kathavte’s daughters and their constant subjection to violence and cruelty. “I prayed for those girls to die. I still do” (27), so that they can escape Kathavte’s slaps and kicks.

Mr. Kathavte’s sons received altogether different treatment from their father. Their privileged gendered position by virtue of being sons enabled them to raise their voice and protest against their father’s overbearing and browbeating attitude.

When Rekha was ten, Bhau stopped beating his sons. Only the girls were privileged from now on. The eldest son, Kishore, had warned his father, “You raise your hand against me and I’ll smash you to a pulp. You won’t be able to move for days.

Bhau stopped beating him. (26)

So, here it would be quite appropriate to quote Sigmund Freud: ‘Anatomy is destiny’ (Barker 2010: 294)
In the above two episodes, Mr. Kushank was more of a witness, while in the following one, he is a full participant. This episode is about one of Kushank’s love-affairs as a college-student at Pune, with a girl named Chandini, who has come from Indore to study there. In Indian cultural milieu, falling in love and getting married is not exclusively personal and easy affair. So many hurdles such as caste, class, region, religion, language etc. come on the way of lovers, intending to marry. There are generations old encoded cultural norms and traditions specifying whom to love and in what conditions. In such an environment, transgressing the patriarchal norms at times costs the life of lovers. Herein, through Kushank – Chandini episode, Nagarkar reflects on unfair social practice of oppressive and unforgiving patriarchy, hostile to young lovers, that eventually succeeds in breaking and braking the affair and giving a full stop to the prospects of their love marriage.

In this episode of the novel when Chandini’s father gets to know about his daughter’s love-affair, he comes from Indore to Pune to see her and “to brain wash her” (142). Finding his daughter’s act quite irrational, he tells her “not to be foolish and impulsive” (142). He tries to convince Chandini that her decision to marry Kushank is an immature one: “Chandini, this is puppy love. You’ll soon outgrow it. Then it won’t suffice and you’ll leave him behind one day” (142).

In his unrelenting efforts to persuade Chandini, Chandini’s father tells her that Kushank has not disclosed certain shady things about his family background:

> He hasn’t told you about his family, has he I made some enquires about the Purandares before I came. His family are not respectable. Kushank and his brother aren’t his father’s children. And Kushank’s aunt is a prostitute in Bombay…” (143)

He even writes a letter to Kushank saying:

**Shri Kushank,**

My daughter does not wish to marry you. Even if she did, she would be helpless against my opposition. I’d advise you not to try and see her. Have the intelligence and wisdom to realize what is good for you. (145)

When her exam is over, Chandini goes back to Indore. After sometimes, Kushank also goes to Indore to see Chandini, considering that her father will not send Chandini back to Pune for her further studies. With a fear of being spied by her family members, Chandini
secretly comes to see Kushank in a cinema hall and apprises him of the situations at her home.

For days no one spoke to her. When they did, they called her a slut, whore, bitch. If she was near enough, they would grab her by the hair and beat her blue. (148)

For day and night Chandini’s family members kept her telling awful things about Kushank and his family. They also made Chandini write to Kushank that she would not marry him. Thus, they (Chandini’s family members) finally succeeded in breaking her affair with Kushank, although, even Kushank’s own economic conditions were completely unfavourable for him to enter into a wedlock with Chandini.

Through all the three episodes elaborated above, Nagarkar has portrayed patriarchal gender relations. Women in all the three different subject positions – as wife, mother and daughter – have suffered oppression. Their marginalized subject positions deprived them of their voice to be heard. They can exercise little powers within and outside the structures of family and domesticity. These women are considered to be guided by their emotions rather than reasons and believed that they have instinctive tendency befitting only for domesticity and motherhood. These patriarchal assumptions about women have legitimated the power relations of dominance and subordination. The moment women come to resist their subjection and try to change their lot by self assertion and by deciding to take their own independent decisions regarding their own matters, men tend to start feeling insecure and threatened. For example, when Chandini sheds oppressive mode of femininity based on patriarchy and refuses to be auctioned in a marriage without her consent and desires to marry a man of her choice, she is subjected to multiple cruelties including abuses, physical assault and emotional blackmailing by her patriarch father and other family members. Thus, it becomes quite clear that till men bring change in their attitude towards women and shed oppressive patriarchal attitude characterized by violence, authority and machismo, women cannot have satisfactory subject positions.

Cultural Polities of caste: A Study of Bhangi (i.e. the untouchable) Colony

…… What is represented as the ‘margin’ is not marginal at all but is a constitutive effect of the representation itself. The ‘centre’ is no more a centre than is the ‘margin’.

A. Brah, Cartographies of Diaspora (1996: 226)
Power is something that occupies a very central position in the functioning of the caste system, constituted on the principle of purity and pollution, inclusion and exclusion. The production of such a damaging and destructive image as “bhangi colony” and associating it to a certain peripheral spatial location, presupposes the power to produce such an image. The term ‘bhangi’ is something that is not created by the so called lower caste people ‘bhangi’ themselves, who very often find their location at the periphery or margin of a city. The word ‘bhangi’ is a coinage of the upper caste actors to maintain their domination over the Dalits and untouchables. This domination of the high caste depends on their assertion of difference: the lower caste people are inferior, seen as dirty, disgusting, impure, inauspicious and their locality is associated with filth, decay and some other stereotypical representations. These people are seen to have a nature that enable them only to perform traditional stigmatized jobs such as collecting dirt, feces and garbage etc.

Such stereotypical modes of representation of the lower caste persons by their upper caster counterparts is a means of practical control. In addition, such inferior modes of representation procure the upper caste people a ground to see themselves as culturally superior and different. Thus behind such a cultural politics, there is an anxiety of identity for the higher caste managers.

‘Wearing a world-creating web of rhetoric, defender of a dominant order attempt to make that order seem natural, necessary, even sacred-and surely they often persuade themselves. Dominant groups produce legitimating concepts of reality that obscure the capricious foundation of social life, making it possible for social actors to believe, at least some of the time, that they live in a just and moral world (Parish 2008: 8)

As a consequence, very often though not necessarily, the lower caste people carry the psychological burden of being low, inferior and powerless and constantly living in such a capricious social environment, their fulfillment denied selves convince them to consider the cultural discontents as their ordained fate and they take retreat into alienation. In this regard, Prof. Gopal Guru comments:

In the Indian social cultural context one might hold the Brahmanical social order responsible for producing and reproducing the idea of dirt and squador. The ideology of purity and pollution that is so central to the definition and survival of Brahmanism primarily aids the politics of cultural metamorphosis that involves the conversion of the corporeal body into what
Barrington Moor calls the walking carrion, which thus becomes deeply repulsive. Walking carrion is the concentrated repression of repulsion. Within the Brahmanical mode of conceptual construction the untouchable represents the combination of multiple stigmatized images which make him/her untouchable, unseeable, unapproachable. It is in this sense that the untouchable’s body in perceived and treated as ‘sociological danger’ (2009: 14).

Kiran Nagarkar’s first three novels are deeply entrenched in foregrounding the cultural politics of caste and its fatal consequences on the marginalized, lower caste communities. His gloomy picture of the Dalits and untouchable in the ‘Bhangi Colony’ section of the novel, highlights the plight and injustices suffered by the people of the ghettoized community. Here, the novelist recounts many aspects of dalit life including construction of their identities in terms of various negative derogatory images that provide them inferior subject-positions and create cultural traping for their subjectivities, and make them suffer an acute financial crisis. They have to live a miserable life deprived of food, clothes and other basic necessities of life. In addition, the author also focuses on the extremely disturbing, the inegalatarian distribution of power between different castes and the social relations based on animosity and exploitation among different communities. Here, Nagarkar expresses his commitment for the restoration of basic human dignity to the lowly people suffering from the multiple inhuman practices of the caste system and its insidious ideologies.

In this section of the novel, the author depicts the untouchables and their locality ‘the Bhangi Colony’ set in the famine sticken Nandadhela, a holy pilgrimage site of the Sikhs in the Southern Maharashtra. Kushank Purandre affectionally called as ‘Shank’ by his cousin Raghu, who is an engineer by profession and is working for an “international organization” ‘MORE’ with its headquarters in Geneva (76).

Jobless Shank, agrees to be an observer for the Organization and accompanies Raghu to Nandadhela, which is completely famine ravaged:

Man and nature, both had changed unrecoganizably here. As the motorbikes passed, flocks of kites and vultures rose lumbering, then slowly settled down to work again. Sporadically we saw human beings sitting, lying, dying, by the roadside. Skeletons. On the move (79).

Raghu and his disaster management team including Shank, reaches at Nandadhela to dig a well, the exclusive source of water for the drought hit people. Here, ‘the earth was
smouldering cinder..... Not a bird in sight apart from the carnivores. No green or yellow leaves. No dry leaves. Just the scorched and crumbly earth and an occasional eye-stinging whirlwind. The scared, shrunken trees. (79)

On their motorbike, heading towards Dalit locality (the Bhangi Colony), on the way Raghu and Kushank encounter the wretched and hapless inmates:

A bullock, his bones sticking out, gave up pulling the cart and slumped down in the middle of the road. The family in the cart were thrown forward and the baby landed at the front wheel of the bike. Its mother gazed expressionlessly at the sky. Her left tit, dry and puckered, pointed at the sky too…. It must have been ‘dead a couple of hours’. Its rackety stomach was stretched and swollen tight over its ribs. (80)

Painting the ghastly pictures of the rural dalits, the above paragraph speaks volumes about the plight and miserable conditions and the utter helplessness of the untouchables. Let alone quality food and clothes, here the womenfolk have to struggle and fight everyday even for water.

Each morning enough water would collect in the one well in Nandadhela to fill three or four buckets. When that was gone, the women started to fight. But there was not spirit in their fights. They were too starved, too desperate, too weary to utter any more than half-hearted abuse. Then that too died down and the village relapsed into hot stillness. (85)

Indicating at the exploitative nature of the upper castes, Raghu tells Kushank not to make an ass of himself believing that the untouchables will be allowed to have an, access to the well, after the completion of the task of digging the same, “which son of a bitch in Nandadhela do you think is going to let the untouchables drink from the well? They’ll have to fight and force their way if they want water” (86).

Realign under the unending indignity and misery, being crushed under the weight of poverty, and chronically suffering from such ailments as cholera, typhoid and dysentery, the physical appearance of the untouchables looks quite deformed and deshaped. The novelist has drawn a very disturbing graphic landscape of their faces:

Millions of lines, indefinitely finer than hair, held those faces together. Only the long snow-white lashes indicated that the old woman had a pair of eyes. The eyes of the old man on her right were petrified with watching the goings-on in the world for so
many years. The seven spaced hairs on the other old man’s bald head were like periscopes, observing the movements in the village from a distance. (84)

Nagarkar, hinting at a very degrading, and dehumanizing conditions in which the wretched village people have to live and struggle through, remarks: “words like helplessness humanity and poverty had no meaning in Nandadhela. But even in that famine-ravaged place I had not seen people quite as broken, crushed and barely human as these. They just stood for a couple of hours. The diggers ignored them completely”. (86). Even the diggers – who themselves were wage-earners – could afford to ignore and treat the village as insignificant, lowly creatures.

Thus, the Bhangis – the lowest of the low caste, who are given the job of cleaning the latrines and sweeping the streets – and the dirty nature of their work further the view of themselves as impure and stigmatized. Somewhere towards the middle of this section of the novel, Nagarkar comes to give a depiction of “the Bhangi Colony” (81), which symbolizes nothing less than an assemblage of disease, dirt, disorder, backwardness, violence and ignorance. The social and physical conditions of the colony in which the Dalits have to live, can not help but bring ill fame and evil repute to the dwellers of the colony:

The Bhangi colony. Three mongrel dogs. And one mother kicking her child out of her way. A thin abrasive haze of dust softened the outlines of everything around. Then the village. A kid started to chase the bike. The women at the well pulled their saris over their faces. The old man at the door of his hut spat a greenish-yellow gob at our wheels. It spattered our legs as the bike went over it. The tailor, the peanut vendor, the doctor with the positions against old age and impotence, the grocer, the Rama temple, the blacksmith and his son working the parched bellows and hammering at a red-hot wheel. Then a few scattered houses. (81)

Edward Said in his book ‘Orientalism’ remarks: “The orient was almost an European invention” (Said 1978: 1). Extending the argument of Said’s book to study the ‘Politics of Caste’, it can be maintained that the representation of the Dalits (untouchables) and their locality (the Bhangi colony) is an act of powerful upper castes. Here the colony is conceived in terms of such demeaning images as ‘mongrel dogs’, ‘mother kicking the child’, ‘abrasive haze of dust’, ‘hut’, ‘a greenish-yellow gob of spit’, ‘potion against old age and impotence’ etc. The truth of the Bhangi colony is an effect of the upper caste people’s powerful position, as these people can only define their inferior the ‘lower caste ones’ and not the vice versa.
The analysis of the above given paragraph regarding the representation of the ‘Bhangi Colony’ in terms of violence, dirt, backwardness, ignorance, is an effect of the politics of caste, working on the principle of domination, control and exclusion etc. Such a degrading socio-cultural representation of the untouchables give them inferior subject position in their society. Their subjection to the dominant regime of representation affect everyday life of these people. They cannot be oblivious of themselves and their identity in the dominant culture. The untouchables would hate the degrading images of their locality as the ‘Bhangi Colony’ which signifies as a place of ill fame, an evil repute, ‘the ghetto’. They just can not escape the burden of their degradation embedded in the institution of their caste. Their association with ‘chillum’ (91) and ‘the bubbling of a hookah’ (92) are further projection of their inferiorization and backward.

“One’s sense of self-consciousness as well as one’s sense of self worth is .... dependent upon the recognition by those whom one seems worthy to recognize ....” (Crossley 1996 : 66). Unlike, “the women at the well pulled their sarees over their faces” (81) of the Bhangi Colony, non-dalit Sardar, Bhisander Singh, whose family lives at some distance from the colony, boasts of being very modern and upto-date: “we are very forward looking, we do not have purdah in our family, unlike the rest of the village” (90).

Here, in this section of the novel, Kiran Nagarkar’s narrative draws our attention towards the dehumanizing practice of the caste system and its incompatibility with democratic values. The author by highlighting the distorted representation (the plight) of the underprivileged section of his society, urges for a fundamental need of structural change in the social order and perceptible change in the outlook toward the dalits. And for this, the onus lies largely on the powerful, especially the upper caste actors.

**The Cultures of Deprivation: Reading Class**

To study the actual situation of the marginalized people in India – which is a more appropriate concept: ‘caste’ characterized in social terms or ‘class’, explained in economic terms? – is still an unresolved issue, as both the terms stand hopelessly inter-twined. However, after studying the ‘politics of caste’ in the previous section, it is quite pertinent to focus on ‘class’.

Despite the suggestions coming from the feminist and post-modernist theorists regarding the irrelevance of class analysis to study people’s life as they consider, the present
day identities are too fluid and too complex to be captured in the rigid category of class than they were in the past, for many culture thinkers the concept of ‘class’ is highly significant. It is a powerful tool for studying society and social relations. Such key concepts as ‘power’, ‘inequality’, ‘domination’, ‘social control’ and ‘ideology’ are the focal areas of class-culture analysis. Expressions like “class struggle is the motor of history” (Wright 2005: 4) and “the executive of the modern state is but a committee of the bourgeoisie” (Wright 2005: 4) retain the prominence of the concept, ‘class’.

As one of the fundamental categories of social stratification, the term ‘class’ signifies collectively sharing the same social, economic or occupational standing. Class divisions are commonly conceived in hierarchical terms, with higher classes enjoying more privilege and greater prestige and authority (Mikula 2008: 24).

Marx and Engels, the leading systematic thinkers of the material approaches to cultural analysis, consider class as a central concept in their schema of cultural exploration. For them, marginalization is an effect of exploitative capitalist mode of production, in which the working classes, deprived of productive resources, are forced to live through miseries and alienation.

The present day capitalist mode of production presupposes the existence of the two classes on the one hand, that of the capitalist, who are in possession of the means of production and subsistence; and on the other hand that of the proletarians, who being excluded from this possession have only single commodity to sell, the labour powers of theirs in order to obtain possession of the means of subsistence, and who therefore have to sell their labour power of theirs in order to obtain possessions of means of subsistence .... the process of exclusion expands alienation of the working class from his or her ‘species essence’ as a human, from the work and the production process, from the society and from themselves (Marx and Engels 1970: 86)

The analysis of class within the Marxist framework is rooted in an egalitarian distribution of the material conditions of life, which however, seems to be too ambitious. Contemporary thinkers such as Charles Taylor and Pierre Bourdieu in their analysis of class have highlighted the hitherto ignored forms of expression including misrecognition, disrespect, humiliation and discrimination. These thinkers are of the view that people at the margin claim for the legitimacy of their values, along with the removal of poverty. They
deserve more material resources, wealth, recognition and respect than they have at their disposal at present.

As a social realist writer, Kiran Nagarkar has a key concern and empathy for the oppressed and the exploited. Highlighting the plight in terms of illness, starvation, death and desolation of the marginalized, is at the centre of the narrative of the novel. As social beings, Kushank and co-characters of the texts suffer exorbitantly due to their culturally and materially deprived class positions. Their lives are nothing less than big rounds of sordidness, poverty and degradation from the birth to the death. Scanty access to the material resources and amenities constrain their lives. And at their expense, the very few persons like capitalist Sardar Bhisander and his family thrive. Thus, even in the context of the novel, it can be maintained that ‘class matters because it creates unequal possibilities for flourishing and suffering’ (Sayer 2005: 218)

Most of the characters including the protagonist, Kushank Purandre suffer from multiple deprivations and incapacities such as quality-education, good health and a reasonably good standard of living. They are under the constant pressures of economic insecurities, and precarious livelihoods, strained social relations and skewed gender relations. They are frequently abused and exploited by those in power such as land-lords and the police. Jobless Kushank tried his hands at various occupations.

I had been jobless since that hospital project. Six months of fruitless searching for a publisher. A couple of Indian publishers had shown some interest, but the bad printing would have ruined the photographs. So I looked for a publisher overseas. Two of them held our promises, but even after a year there was little progress. A whole year of despondency and hopelessness. No doubt they had good reason for the jobs. (77 – 78)

Because of his constant subjections to unemployment and resulting poor economic conditions, Kushank is forced to offer tuitions.

I woke up one morning and decided to give up the book. If they publish it, well, that’s fine. I started to tutor school-children. Bought myself a book to brush up my grammar. Sometimes I got bored and told them stories. One of the parents warned me against this a couple of times, but the boy and I got on well, so I hadn’t been sacked yet. (78)
Kushank’s humble economic background is further revealed by the father of Chandini, who tells Chandini that Kushank’s aunt indulges into prostitution to earn her livelihood. Chandini’s father says:

I made some enquiries about the Purandares before I came. His family are not respectable. Kushank and his brother aren’t his father’s children. And Kushank’s aunt is a prostitute in Bombay...

(143)

Chandini’s father considers Kushank almost a street urchin. Keeping in view, the disadvantageous socio-economic condition of Kushank, he dissuades his daughter Chandini to marry Kushank, saying that the relations of intimacy between the married couples can not last long, if they are not supported by a strong financial security. With an effort to convince his daughter, he says: “Chandani, this is puppy love. You’ll soon outgrow it. Then it won’t suffice and you’ll leave him behind one day”. (142)

Keeping in view his pathetic economic conditions, Kushank himself could not commit to Chandini for the marriage, despite Chandini’s offer to wait till the both start earning. “I promise we won’t got married till we’re both earning our living” (139). However, not being sure of himself and his improving economic lot in coming times, Kushank ruminates:

Left to myself, I couldn’t have asked her for another four or five years, no, not in a lifetime. If the distance between your mouth and your belly is uncertain and elastic, then your opinion of yourself is likely to fluctuate too. Add to that extreme self-depreciation and innumerable inferiority complexes. And Chandani becomes unattainable. (139)

Prachiniti episode in the very early sections of the novel is another harrowing account of suffering caused by penury. Very intimate to Kushank, Prachiniti married to a painter, Shatlaj and the mother of little Arshad, is admitted in a municipal hospital. “If Prachinit had been taken to hospital ten months earlier, she might have lived another couple of years” (34) Prachiniti’s prolonged and insufferable ailment coupled with her family’s utter state of destitution, hurts Kushank immensely, despite his own being in a state of privation. “Shatlatj tried to sell his paintings. Tutored others in painting. And then sold his colours and easel too. To buy Prachiniti’s medicine” (34). Finally Prachinit and her husband Shatlaj look up to Kushank for the monetary help to meet the hospital expenses and contact Kushank for the same. However, Kushank is pained at his utter helpless and replies:

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“If I had money I wouldn’t come and eat at your house every other day. “There’s no one else I can ask. I’ve already borrowed from other friends. And they ask me why I always need money. To survive. To eat. Why don’t they understand? Don’t they ever get hungry? Morning, noon, and night? Why not just eat once? For a lifetime? Why do we eat so often? Even people who have never lent me money ask the same questions”. (34-35)

Kushank still efforts to arrange the money and asks his friends and relatives but only to meet his dismay. His rich but callous friends remain unmoved. Kushank recounts:

Sometimes, I tried begging, begging doesn’t necessarily get you anything. Certainly not money. My friends were happy to take me to the movies, the theatre, concerts. But they didn’t offer me the money for the tickets. So my wallet stayed empty and Prachinti went without medicine for days. (34)

And Prachiniti “only died, slowly through ten months, ten times thirty days. Days and weeks and all the hours of the day”. (35) And eventually realizing the futility his efforts, Kushank is so much overpowered by the grief that he did not even turn back to look at her “oxygen cylinder, temperature charts, jars of saline, bottles and bottles of medicine”. (36)

Hunger and poverty at times become a breeding ground of shame and humiliation. The poor class subject position affects access to esteem or respect from others. It also affects our relationship with others and shows how people are valued in this situation. It has been noticed that life-chances and achievements are heavily affected by the lottery of the birth class. In the context of the novel, Kushank recalls an incident that occurred to him in the early part of his life, when he was heaped with humiliation.

When my mother died I started eating out. My father gave me money every month and let me fend for myself. If I asked for more, he gave me more. But I didn’t like to ask too often. Then I had to go hungry. I had got used to two-day fasts. But sometimes my head and stomach would play havoc. There’s a point up to which hunger is unbearable. Cross it and then it’s easy. But when I’d missed three or four meals, I felt a string wind itself round me and start to tighten. The world swam beforemy eyes and there was a numb humming in my brain. (168)

“And when the hunger became insufferable, Kushank finally dropped in at his friend Jitendra’s house and it was his “third meal in four days at Jitendra’s”. It was almost midnight, but I knew they are late and anyway, however, lat it got. I was sure of getting a meal there. As I reached for may second hot chapatti, Jitendra’s mother said something angrily, in Sindhi. There was a
sudden silence at the table. Jitendra’s little brother and sister starred at their plates. I had never learnt Sindhi, but I did know enough to interpret what she had said, “Hasn’t he a home to go to? Here, every day…. Is this a home or a restaurant? Only Jitendra continued to eat calmly. I thought of pretending that I hadn’t understood. But my face had paled. (168 – 169)

Despite his friend Jitendra’s consolation that “Don’t let her (the mother) worry you. After all, I’m the bread-winner in the family, aren’t I?” Kushank could never forget the bitter taste of biting words. It is quite possible that Jitendra’s mother would not have behaved the same, had Kushank been from an affluent class or family. In this regard, Adam Smith, the father of Modern Economics, very befittingly comments on the human tendency to treat the rich and poor with double standards: ‘This disposition to admire, and almost to worship, the rich and the powerful, and to despise, or, at least, to neglect, persons of poor and mean condition,... is ... the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments. (Smith 1759: 1984: 61)

Exploitation is a pivotal concept in the Marxist analysis of class. It is a process through which the dominant group or person excludes a major chunk people from having access to productive resources including land, capital, raw material etc. And the very process of exclusion enable the exploiter to appropriate the labour output effort of exploited lots. So, exploitation is a direct result of the inequalities in incomes generated by inequalities in the ownership of material resources. To be more precise: the material welfare of exploiters causally depends upon the material deprivations of the exploited. This means that the interest of the actors within such relations are not merely different, they are antagonistic of the realization of the interest of exploiters imposes harms on the exploited. (Wright 2005: 23)

In the novel, the plight of the villagers, almost reduced to skeletons, migrating from the famine strike Nandadhela, owes a lot to their deprived class subject positions. Their dying of food-poisoning, cholera, dysentery, typhoid or even plain starvation speaks volumes of their marginalized material status. The drought hit land can yield no crops to feed their stomach. Even the life sustaining water has become an equally scarce commodity for them.

Each morning enough water would collect in the one well in Nandadhela to fill three or four buckets. When that was gone, the women started to fight. But there was no spirit in their fights. They were too starved, too desperate, too weary to utter any more than half-hearted abuse. Then that too died down and the village relapsed into hot stillness. (85)
‘There’s a curse on Nandadhela that not even the white men could lift’ (80) In the
given pressing circumstances, the villagers are condemned to sell their dear land to “the stock
villain” (81), self-conserving and profit making, feudal, Sardar Bhisander Singh at a very
negligibly low price. The conversation between Kushank’s cousin Raghu and a villager
should make things more clear.

Raghu started at him incredulous. “You sold your land?
“Yes, sahib, Not just me. A lot of people in the village sold theirs too.
“What price?”
“Price?” he smiled feebly. “How can I bargain at a time like this? It was
God’s gift, my piece of land. But I took what they gave me.”
“Did you put your thumb on the deed?”
Of course. To receive money and not put may thumb on the deed – it’d be
as bad as masturbating in a whore’s bed.”
“Will you come back with us?”
“No, sahib. It’s no use.” (80 – 81)

Geneva based an International Non-Government Organizaion, MORE – Raghu and
his team work for it – is working here at Nandadhela to counter the disaster and digging a
well for the people. Sardar Bhisander, projecting himself as a messiah of the local people
urges Raghu to stop his men digging the well:

There is no water in this village. You’re wasting my
people’s time. Giving them false hopes. You’ll up and leave one
day, but they’ll stay and die of hunger. These are my people. I
won’t stand by to see them suffer. (88)

However, the real intention of the Sardarji is to let the people leave the village at non
availability of water, so that he can amass their land almost free of cost. To execute his
intention, Sardar Bhisander corrupts Raghu offering him bribe, so that he withdraws his men
from digging the well.

During the course of the deal, Raghu says to Bhisander “you brought half of the
village for practically nothing. What is fifty thousand to you?” (89)
And “finally, the Sardar produced the money” (90).

As if this is not enough, the Sardar played a trick and got in a local Newspaper, The
Nehalpur Daily, published: “Sardar Bhisander’s generous gift to famine – stricken
Nandadhela – 50,000 rupees” (90).

The analysis of the above narrative should make it clear that the flourishing of the
Sardar Bhisander – salute receiving “figure in the sherwani” (85), an impressive man (88),
puffing on his pipe (88), a huge alsatian dog (89), a high brick wall surrounding a two-storey 
house (81) – is in the inverse proportion to the suffering of the Nandadhela villagers, who are 
‘quite broken, crushed and barely human’ (86). The Sardar makes his material advantage by 
excluding the villagers from access to their land – the only source of their livelihood and 
survival. Thus, it seems quite convincing to conclude that the privileged position and the 
advantage of a person/ group is at the expense of the disadvantaged. “In the case of 
exploitation, the exploiters actively need the exploited: exploiters depend upon the effort of 
the exploited for their own welfare” (Wright 2005: 24).

Keeping in view all the given above episodes involving Kushank, Prachinity. Chandini, Jitendra and Sardar Bhisander, it is quite clear that for the effective exercise of the 
human agency, the fulfillment of certain basic needs are must. Exclusion and non-access to 
the material riches and resources, really leads to the damage and debasement of people. Hence,

‘class matters to us not only because of differences in 
material wealth and economic security, but also because it affects 
our access to things, relationships, experiences and practices which 
we have reason to value, and hence our chance of living a fulfilling 
life. At the same time it affects how others value us and respond to 
us, which in turn affects our sense of self-worth’. (Sayer 2005: 1)

Religious Identity and Violence: Reading Police Brutalities

Violence is formented by the imposition of singular and 
belligerent identities on gullible people, championed by proficient 
artisans of terror.

Amartya Sen, Identity and Violence (2006: 2)

According to a French theorist, Louis Althusser, the ‘State Apparatuses’, a set of 
institutions by which the ruling class keeps its hegemony and dominations over the ruled ones 
intact, are of two types, though they are not mutually exclusive. On one hand, the state 
comprises of institutions – the religions, the educational, the family, the legal, the political, 
the communication (press, radio, television etc.) and the culture (literature, arts, philosophy 
etc.) – what he calls the ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’ (ISAs). On the other hand, there are 
repressive institutions – the police, the army, the courts, the prisons, the civil servants, the 
govt. – through which the ruling class enforces its rules, argues Althusser. He calls the latter
category of institutions as the ‘Repressive State Apparatus’ (RSAs). The fundamental difference between these two categories of institutions is explained by Althusser himself:

The (Repressive) State Apparatus functions massively and predominantly by repression (including physical repression), while functioning secondarily by ideology. (There is no such thing as purely repressive apparatus) ... for their part, the Ideological State Apparatuses function massively and predominantly by ideology, but they also function secondarily by repressions, even if only ultimately, but only ultimately, this is very attenuated and concealed, even symbolic. (There is no such thing as purely ideological apparatus). (1971: 136)

With regard to this novel, the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) including gender, caste and class and their constructing and constraining impact on the subjectivities of the characters have been discussed at length in the earlier sections of this project. Now, we will take recourse to the second category of the State Apparatus, the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA), the police and its brutality, in reading the most depressing and despairing concluding section of the novel.

It is an occasion of celebrating the Ganpati festival in Bombay. Kushank Purandre holding his relative Kaku, is “caught up in the maze of whirling bodies. Being sucked in” (207), possessed and hypnotized by the fervor of the festival, Kushank is completely lost “in his godhood” (207). He says: “I was face to face with archetypal forces and which make myths more meaningful, inevitable and powerful than both reality and rationality”. (207) Kushank being almost in a state of trance, was “no longer in danger of loosing” (207) his personality. But all of sudden, something contrary to the situation and completely shocking and unanticipated occurred.

Looks like a South Indian. Long live Shivsena. The first blow knocked out three of my teeth. Don’t talk shit. The bastard’s Muslim. Look at his eyes. Throttling me. Check his penis to make sure. Don’t allow the motherfucker to desecrate Lord Ganesh. Jai Bhavani. Long live Shivaji, Sirens, police. What evil spell has the son of a bitch been casting? Blows, sticks, arriving at the police station with a torn lip, bloodied, black and blue. (207 – 208)

Kushank, presumed to be a muslim by the police, is taken to the police station and beaten black and blue there on the charge of descrilizing the sacred Hindu god ‘Ganesh’.

This is my second trip to a police station. They all look the same. The colours of the uniforms change. A picture of a smiling
toothless Gandhi on the wall, and the current president. It was Radhakrishnan in Benares, here it is Giri. (208)

Then they beat me. How these people beat you. At Chowpati and here at the station. Beat you, beat you, beat you, beat you. Kicks iron rods, rats down your legs, sticks, boots, I don’t remember any more. Singly and collectively, they keep beating. Putting their boots into my kidneys, shoving lighted cigarettes up my nose, rapping my swollen testicles with the butt end of a pencil, breaking the bridge of my nose, blue, black, green, purple, beat you, beat you, beat you, they never stop. (208 – 209)

Kushank, wrongfully accused by the police, is beaten savagely. Believing him to be a Muslim, he is shown no sense of sympathy and fellow-feeling. In the garb of securing and safeguarding the interest of the society and acting as a state agency, the police subjects Kushank to cruel, degrading treatment and barbaric torture to secure confession.

Name?
Address?
What party do you belong to?
Religion?
Muslim?
Hindu?
Name?
Address? (209)

Also charging him to be a traitor (211), Kushank is further subjected to inhuman treatment to extract information from him. “And after a while, the officer opened my swollen lips gently and pushed in a Novalgian tablet and then some water”. (210)

It took me a long time to surface after he had kicked me in the back. Them I was out of the water and had hit the air. I could breathe but couldn’t force the air down my throat. My eyes bulged and my ribcage came apart at the seams. Then I lost control over my body and the breath flowed in.

I moved my leg and found that I had wet myself “Oh, God,” I whispered, “This can’t be happening, can’t be.” (212)

The given below couplet by an American punk Rock Band, ‘the Dead Kennedys’ popular in 1980, written satirically as a mark of protest on social and political issues, including the state and police atrocities, seems quite befitting here even in the case of Kushank’s subjection to the police torture:

Roll down your dress, here’s is kick in the ass,
Let’s beat you blue until you can shit in your pants.

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And finally Kushank looses his voice in history forever. “Only the certainty of a full stop. Then blackness and no more pain. Was it hours or days of unconsciousness? All I know is that it was a time without pain without myself”. (213) In this regard, a social theorist remarks a very pertinently:

Personal pain is degrading and dehumanizing experience unless meaning is vested in it. The investment of personal pain with meaning transforms it into suffering, which then becomes a social process. The individual derives dignity out the acknowledgment of her [his] pain and is thus in a better position to feel worthy of the suffering, and available to the possibilities for healing. (Ramphele 1997: 114)

In the novel Kushank is not able to transform the pain inflicted on him into suffering and thus he meets a very bad death.

A critical reading of the horrendous and ghastly account of the tortures meted out to Kushank by the Bombay police should compel us to think: why should he be subjected to such a cruel and ugly treatment? And what is his fault for which he has to meet such an ugly treatment leading to his death? Even a bit of reflection should make it quite clear that his only fault is that he is assumed to be a Muslim by the police and whose mere presence desecrates the celebration of the Ganesh festival. Kushank’s supposedly religious identity of being a Muslim occasion his subjection to violence and eventually to death. To be a Muslim is simply a matter of being a culturally different person from that of a Hindu but this “cultural difference is one of several forms of essentialism used to explain away assaults on dignity and suffering in general practices, including torture …..”. (Farmer 1997: 278).

However, the causes of violence are not inherent in human beings’ religious-cultural identities themselves. They are there in their perceptions of those “cultural difference”. Such a high degree of intolerance and prejudice against the religious ‘other’ prevalent in the law enforcing agency, ‘the police’ leads to the appalling consequences. This attitude of ‘miniaturizing’ (Amartyasen’s coinage) a person, that is, defining a person in terms of a singular identity (especially the religious one), calls for re-examination and reassessment. Overlooking of various other affiliations and identities other than the religious one that people have – such as that of class, gender, profession, language, morals, politics – is a big
intellectual error. In this regard, Prof. Amartya Sen writes, very cogently in the preface of his book ‘Identity and Violence:

The prospects of peace in the contemporary world may well lie in the recognition of the plurality of our affiliations and in the use of reasoning as common inhabitants of a wide world, rather than making us into inmates rigidly incarcerated in little containers. (2006: XVII)

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Kiran Nagarkar’s landmark text, Seven Sixes Are Forty-Three – a representation of the marginalized and oppressed sections of the post independent Indian/ Maharashtrian society – is a disturbing narrative of struggle for existence and survival in a world abounding in poverty, degradation, crime, violence hopelessness and distorted human relations. The novel denies the Arnoldian sense of culture as some autonomous realm of ideas, values and beliefs. Rather it (the text) views culture as fundamentally and inextricably linked to power, history and subjectivity and identity. The cultural categories of caste, class, gender and religion have deep effects on our subjectivities. Our sense of who we are, where we belong to and what we can do, are most clearly explained through these cultural categories. Religion, class, caste and gender oppression operate in a social set-up as much through the institutions of culture – the family, educational and religious institutions and media – as through the repressive and violent forces of the police and other state agencies.

Much of the twentieth century literary – cultural theories and approaches, such as New Criticism, Russian formalism, Archetype Mythical approaches and structuralism deny the role of history and see culture as atemporal phenomena. However, the current novel under scrutiny, asserts the centrality of history: the above reading of the text should make it clear that the protagonist Kushank and other characters of the text are deeply rooted and located in their historical contexts and they cannot escape the burden of their histories. The novel may also be considered as an important cultural-political intervention for change, as it calls for the recognition of the unjustness of exploitation and oppression. Mr. Mulk Raj Anand, one of the great Indian writers in English, speaking about the real test of the novelist, once said:

What is writer if he is not the fiery voice of the people, who, through his own torments, urges and exultations, by realizing the pains, frustrations and aspiration of others, and by cultivating
his incipient of expression, transmuting in arts, all feelings, all thought, all experience – thus, becoming the seer of a new vision in any given situation. (Dhawan 1992: 14)

Highlighting the importance of commitment in her writing, the eminent Indian writer of the marginalized, Mahasweta Devi writes:

I have always believed that real history is made by ordinary people ... the reason and inspiration of my writing are people who are exploited and used, and yet do not accept defeat for me, the endless source of ingredients for writing, is in these amazingly, noble, suffering human beings. (Wikipedia)

Kiran Nagarkar in his writings and especially in this novel, has done a great social service by championing the cause of humanity, social justice and human welfare. Deriving the impetus for his writings from the oppressed and the exploited, his contribution in the field of literature, it may be maintained, is as immense and significant as that of Mulk Raj Anand and Mahasweta Devi. Kiran Nagarkar as a writer for ‘the people’, assails the constituted wrongs done to the poor. This novel dwells deep into the lowest strata of his society and lampoons the rich and the affluent ones. Nagarkar also draws our attention to the fact that there can be no alleviation of human suffering without the restoration of human dignity to the common people and no positive change can be wrought in a society without realizing the value of respecting the different, the other.