Chapter-IV
Metamorphic Indian Society . . .
In the land of Holy Ganges
Chapter IV

In the present chapter Vikram Seth’s second novel *A Suitable Boy* (1993) is critically analysed. The novel has gone down in a history of Indian English Fiction as a remarkable publishing phenomenon on account of its length of 1,349 pages as well as the largest ever paid advance amounting to two hundred and fifty thousand pounds paid to writer. It is dedicated to Papa and Mama and to the memory of Amma. Even *A Word of Thanks* by the writer is given in the form of sonnet:

**A WORD OF THANKS**

To these I owe a debt past telling:
My several muses, harsh and kind;

My folks, who stood my sulks and yelling,
And (in the long run) did not mind;

Dead legislators, whose orations
I’ve filched to mix my own potations;

Indeed, all those whose brains I’ve pressed,
Unmerciful, because obsessed;

My own dumb soul, which on a pittance
Survived to weave this fictive spell;

And, gentle reader, you as well,
The fountainedhead of all remittance.

Buy me before good sense insists
You’ll strain your purse and sprain your wrists.
There are nearly One million words kneaded in 478 Sections of 19 parts which are entitled as under:

1  Browsing through books, two students meet one day.
    A mother mopes; a medal melts away.

2  A courtesan sings coolly through the heat.
    A hopeful lover buys a parakeet.

3  A couple glide down-river in a boat.
    A mother hears that mischief is afloat.

4  Two men discuss the Brahmpur leather trade.
    A pair of brogues (maroon) is planned and made.

5  Blood soaks a lane, and bullets ricochet.
    A legislative vixen baits her prey.

6  A baby kicks; a bloodshot Raja yowls.
    A young man speeds downhill; a father growls.

7  Calcutta simmers in a stew of talk.
    A cemetery affords a pleasing walk.

8  Beneath the neem the village children play.
    Worn cattle churn the burning earth to clay.

9  A desperate mother ventures to deploy
    Fair means or foul to net a suitable boy.
10 A wolf-hunt is arranged; at Baitar Fort
   A cheated marksman looks for further sport.

11 Old landlords sue the state to keep their lands.
   Crushed corpses rot upon the holy sands.

12 A kiss brings fury, Twelfth Night sparks a snub,
   And even bridge stokes tumult at the Club.

13 A child is born; wise women come to look.

14 The Prime Minister fights, and keeps his head.
   Sad sons assuage the spirits of their dead.

15 The flames of Karbala and Lanka blaze,
   Igniting madness through the city’s maze.

16 Calcutta Christmas lights festoon Park Street;
   And at a cricket match three suitors meet.

17 Someone is stabbed in Brahmpur, someone dies,
   While private shame is viewed by public eyes.

18 One person, five, and forty thousand choose;
   and --- as must be --- some lose.

19 The curtain falls; the players take their bow
   And wander off the stage – at least for now.
These 19 sub-titles are in the form of couplets, which reveals the central motifs of each section in stream of consciousness. These sub-titles show that nothing is missing from the piercing gaze of the poet-novelist.

Further it is worth pointing that Angela Atkins has published a book entitled; Vikram Seth’s ‘A Suitable Boy’: “A Reader’s Guide (2002-London), which is a guide for the readers to understand the novel in proper perspective. There is wide publicity of the novel before its publication as well as after its publication. Large number of critics wrote articles on the novel before and after publication. In fact there is a Publicity Department of the publishers, who continuously gave material of publicity about this novel before publication to attract the literary world as well as ordinary readers and the readers were curious about the publication of this long novel. When the novel was published, there was also maximum publicity because after a long time particularly Victorian era, a bulky novel in English was published. Considerable number of critics from English speaking countries were fascinated by the novel and large number of critical articles were published not only in newspapers, periodicals but also in literary journals. Wide publicity and advertisement too played a significant role in the sale of the novel. Art has become a commodity in the market like any other commodity and the artist has sold himself as well as his art.

In the present novel there are large number of characters and as such the writer has given the family trees before the beginning of the novel. Vikram Seth has quoted with approval two epigram of a famous French Philosopher, Voltaire:

The superfluous, that very necessary thing. — Voltaire

“The secret of being a bore is to say everything.” — Voltaire

138
It is an interesting tale of Four families-----Mehras----Kapoors, Khans and Chatterjis. The family trees are given to avoid confusion.

**MEHRAS**

DR KISHAN CHAND SETH  
FIRST WIFE (d) REMARRIED
PARVATI

CHILDREN
INCLUDING

RAGHBIR MEHRA (d)

ARUN MEHRA

SAVITA VARUN LATA

MEENA KSHI
(NEE Chatterji)

PRAN KAPOOR

APARNA

**KHANS**

OLD NAWAB SAHIB (d) m WIFE (d)

NAWAB SAHIB BROTHER BROTHER(d)
BEGUM (d) (in Pakistan)
OF BAITAR

m

BEGUM

WIFE (d)

ABIDA KHAN

ZAINAB

IMTIYAZ KHAN

FIROZ KHAN

m

HUSBAND

HASSAN

ABBAS

**KAPOORS**

MR TANDON (d) m
OLD MRS TANDON  
OLD MRS MAHESH KAPOOR

KEDARNATH m

VEENA

PRAN MAAN

BHASKAR

SAVITA KAPOOR

(nee Mehra)

d= deceased
m= married

**CHATTERJIS**

OLD MR CHATTERJI
m

WIFE (d)

MR JUSTICE CHATTERJI
m

MRS CHATTERJI

AMIT MEENA KSHI DIPANKAR KAKOLI TAPAN

m

ARUN MEHRA

APARNA

139
Sketch of City of Brahmpur, Purva Pardesh, India

- Tanneries
- Ravidaspur
- Barsaat Mahal
- Ganges
- Bath Gaths
- Cremation Gaths
- Brahmpur Fort
- Subziapore Club
- University of Brahmpur

Chowk
- Misri Mandi
- Brahmpur Old

Barber-Fortune Teller-Tea stall-Vegetable stall

Thieves-Monkey trainers-Ear cleaners
- "The Colonies"
- Pasand Bagh

Dowling & Snapps
"Magourian" (tailors)

Nabiganj Avenue
- "Praha Shoeshop"
- "Red Fox"
- Chez Yasmeen
- Blue Danube
- Manorna Talkies

North
Vikram Seth’s novel in prose entitled **A Suitable Boy** was published in 1993. The title of the novel reveals the main theme. “A Suitable” title suits the Indian way of calling the bride or bridegroom according to terms and conditions of both the parties’ parents. They call it as matching of horoscopes, a befitting match for either party. It is an appropriate title. When the match makers succeed in their venture, then other things are decided. The horoscopes of boy and girl should match and both should be from the same caste and sub-caste. The matching of the horoscopes of boy and girl and agreement on the dowry are the two pre-requisites of an “arranged marriage”

The novel portrays India in all its myriad colours, splendour and squalor from the Nawabs, Land Lords and the business men to the tanners and rickshaw pullers from middle class urban families to poor down trodden rural people, lower castes, untouchables from the corrupt politicians to the academicians, from music soirees from Dusehra to Holi revelry to Moharrum Mourning, from college board meetings to amateur poetry sessions and singing of love poetry by the Tauwaifs, (courtesans) from the fictional city of Brahmpur in Purva Pradesh to the cosmopolitan city of Calcutta. It depicts post-Independent India of 1950’s on miniature scale. This is a long novel of 1349 pages like an epic. It is of epic proportion in size and it begins ‘in media res’ and has a main story which interweaves with stories within stories. It realistically mirrors contemporary India which was still a “babe-in-the-arm” nation in the comity of “Free countries of the world”. India became a free country on 15th August, 1947 and 5/6 years span in the life of a country is a very short, India was partitioned and ‘two nations’ were born. The Western conception of “Nation” and “Democracy” are completely new to Indians and new nation is called Indian Union Republic on 26th January 1950. It
is not possible to present the entire complex entity of a nation in fiction or even in history.’ ‘The New Historists’ believe that literary texts and non-literary texts ‘circulate inseparably’ help the readers to see how fiction projects a history as much as history in the traditional sense does. It is said history and literature are both discourses that ‘construct’ rather than ‘reflect’ and ‘invent’ rather than ‘discover’. In the words of Mahapatra and Nayak:

“A Suitable Boy is a product of a realistic, aesthetic, which ... is given to anthropomorphizing. The novel is about the world of men, and women, and about the world of History.”  

Cristopher Rollason is of the opinion that:

“In A Suitable Boy Vikram Seth offers a hybrid blend of the fictional but typical with actual historical characters and events.”

It is interesting to point out that large number of critics have shown great interest in the novel. A modern critic, Cielo G. Festino has drawn a sketch of fictitious city of Brahmpur which is appended hereto. He comments that:

“A Suitable Boy’ is a long saga that takes place in post Independence India in the 1950s at the end of the colonial rule and the beginning of the Indian republic and extends geographically from the imaginary community of Brahmpur and its country side, Delhi, Calcutta, Kanpur and Lucknow clearly, A Suitable Boy is a novel in which ‘place’ plays a central role.”
Brahmpur, is an imaginary quintessential city of India. It is a symbol of the hundreds of such cities that are scattered all over the country. It holds within itself all the variety of people, diversity in religion, caste, colour, race, language, class culture, traditions, customs and professions including politicians that make the mosaic of twentieth-century India soon after its Independence from the foreign rule. The city is described in detail, the old and the new, of the rich and the poor, the residential and the commercial. The novelist sketches realistically:

“Nabiganj was the fashionable shopping street where the quality of Brahmpur were to be seen strolling up and down of an evening....The signs were painted in English, and the prices matched the signs. Book shops....well-stocked general stores...fine tailors...an elegant jeweller’s, restaurants and coffee houses...two cinema halls...The Tonga... among the bullock-carts, cycle-rickshaws, cycles and pedestrians... which they shared with barbers plying their trade out of doors, fortune-tellers, flimsy tea-stalls, vegetable stands, monkey-trainers, ear-cleaners, pickpockets, stray cattle, the odd sleepy policeman sauntering along in faded khaki, sweat soaked men carrying impossible loads of copper, steel rods, glass or scrap paper on their backs”.(89)

He presents contrasting pictures of wealth and poverty, crowds and individuals, beggars, young and old, aggressive and meek, leprous, students...mangy dogs... skeletal cats...and flies. It is not only the public places
that bring to life, but also the private garden in the bungalow called "Prem Nivas" and it brings out the lavish lifestyle of rich people in Indian society:

"...the honey-scented harbinger...in blossom...the roses in their first full flush...the sweet alyssum and sweet wilier...beds of feathery-leafed larkspur...the tall ranks of the equally feathery-leafed...cosmos...the garden had been full of birds: pond-herons, partridges, mynas, small puffed up grey babbles in their groups of seven, hoopoes and parakeets...a pair of red-wattles lapwings and a couple of vultures..." (176)

The socio-political, economical and cultural realities of post-Independent India in early 1950's are presented in great detail. India is just into her fourth year of freedom and the nation is shown to be grappling with a number of complex economical, political, cultural, social lingual, academic etc. problems. He artistically blends various strands of everyday life into his novel. There are descriptive and evocative passages in the novel. The visit to tanning pit by Haresh and Kedarnath is described realistically:

"The dirt paths stopped suddenly at a open area surrounded by shacks and pockmarked by circular pits which had been dug into the ground and lined with hardened clay. A fearsome stench rose from the stench zone... The sun shone harshly down, and the heat made the stench worse still. Some of the pits were filled with a white liquid, others with a white tannic brew. Dark, scrapping off fat and hair from a pile of hides. A pig was drinking at a ditch filled with stagnant black water. Two children with filthy matted hair were playing in the dust near the pits." (200)
The Ravivar bazar, a Weekly Sunday Bazar of the village, is a very common sight even in the Metropolitan cities of India, is truely presented in detail:

"The weekly bird market... was in full swing. Thousands of birds...sat or fluttered in iron or cane cages in little stalls from which rowdy hawkers cried out the excellence and cheapness of their wares. The pavement had been taken over by the bird market, and buyers or passers-by like Ishaq had to walk on the occasional Tonga."

(111)

In India, a person’s individuality gets submerged under the heavy burden of familial ties and constraints. The Indian Joint Family System, particularly among the Hindu Community, is the pivot on which the novel rests. The novelist does not critique the system but presents it as it exists at that time. At present time the ‘Joint Family System’ is rapidly vanishing from the society. Fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, sons and daughters, sons-in-law and daughters-in-law, brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law, mother-in-laws and father-in-laws, the whole gamut is found in it and marriage is the fulcrum on which the entire book rests. The novel begins with a marriage and it ends with another. In India the happiest moment in one’s life is his /her marriage. It opens with the words “You too will marry a boy I choose” and ends the day after that wedding. It presents the realistic picture of emerging progressive India.

The main interest is focused on four families—the Mehras, the Chatterjees, the Kapoors and the Khans—and only two persons namely, Lata Mehra and Maan Kapoor are significant and Lata is the principal character. Each family has a major
plot and therefore, there are four major plots and there are many sub-plots here to support the four plots to advance slowly and steadily towards the main plot—the search for a suitable boy. The sub-plots—the academic skulduggery, the political feud between Nehru and Tandon, and the political rift between L.N. Agarwal and Mahesh Kapoor, on the other and the affair between Saeeda Bai and Maan, all contribute to the progress of the main plot.

Mrs. Rupa Mehra, wife of Late Raghubir Mehra, heads the Mehras. Lata, Savita and Pran, son of Mahesh Kapoor, is her son-in-law, Varun on the other hand with Mrs. Mehra are orthodox and traditionalists. Arun Mehra and his wife, Meenakshi Mehra, the daughter of Justice Chatterjee represent modernity.

The Chatterjees are headed by Justice Chatterjee, a Judge of Calcutta High Court and his father, a retired Judge of Calcutta High Court, five children and Mrs. Chatterjee are his protégé. All the persons are snobs and symbolise the twilight glory of the British Rule and Westernised culture. Dipankar is a follower of Aurobindo and Mrs. Chatterjee is a great admirer of famous poet, Dr. Rabindranath Tagore.

The Kapoors are led by Mahesh Kapoor, Revenue Minister in the S.S. Sharma Ministry of Purva Pradesh. His wife, Mrs. Kapoor, is deeply religious but superstitious and a conservative woman. His daughter, Veena is married to Kedarnath Tandon, who is completely dependent on the Nawab Saheb, all are enjoying lives in their own ways. His elder son Pran Kapoor is working as a Lecturer-in-English at Brahmpur University. He is married to Savita Mehra. The entire family with the exception of Mahesh Kapoor and Maan Kapoor are orthodox and traditionalists.
The Nawab Saheb of Baiter, an aristocrat, a rich landlord and a big man in every respect heads the Khans. His sons Imtiyaz Khan, Firoz Khan and his daughter Zainab are completely dependent on the Nawab Saheb. All are enjoying life in their own way except Begum Abida Khan, who is a modern woman.

All these four major plots are supported by the sub plots of less significance but equally move on with these four main plots. Prof. Mishra, Head, Deptt of English leads the sub-plot of the academic skulduggery of English Deptt. Brahmpur University with the full support of his orthodox and traditional colleagues except Pran Kapoor.

Prof. Mishra is a traditionalist in academic field. The sub-plot of L.N. Agarwal, pitted against Mahesh Kapoor, helps to highlight political rivalry of the warring groups in country’s ruling “Indian National Congress Party” in 1950-52, between the Nehru faction and Tandon faction. Mr. L.N. Agarwal is an orthodox and traditionalist, in the group of Tandon. Mr. Mahesh Kapoor, a progressive secularist, is a follower of Nehru.

The tannery work of Haresh Khanna forms another sub-plot, running along with Mrs. Mehra, Mr. Mishra, Mr. Agarwal and Mrs. Kapoor. Haresh is unmarried and is in the business of shoe producing industry.

The present novel is very lengthy and it has many plots and sub-plots, so the story moves slowly. Seemita Mohanty rightly says that:

“It is both comprehensive and compact an able account of many forces that operated in Indian society in the years immediately after independence and a scintillating
analysis of the clash personalities, convictions and cultures.

**A Suitable Boy** is both a reflection of the contemporary social nebulosity and a steady attempt to probe into that and determine how best that can be shaped and controlled. ——"Seth's book is original, rich and real, and it is a realism which is humorous and tender by turns. Life moves through its vast frame as it does in the world with a "charged aimlessness". 4

After critically analysing the novel, its plot structure, various themes and characterization, mode of narration, style, language etc. Angela Atkin comes to a conclusion that:

"The novel is not only a love story but also a depiction of India; however, it does not attempt as some Indian novels in English have done, to represent the whole of the vast nation. It portrays only a specific slice of it, the middle and upper classes of North Indian society in the early 1950s its depiction is broadly speaking, comic: the tone varies but is most often light, and the plot finishes with a wedding, which is traditionally a happy ending". 5

On the whole the novel is long and complicated, mingled with extraneous elements—i.e. entire episodes are borrowed from contemporary Indian history and the prevailing current of thought is interrupted by large number of digressions and moral reflections that the novel appears very loosely put together. It starts in a dramatic manner, full of dialogues, actions and revealing of characters. Mrs.Mehra is a major character. Lata is daughter of Mrs. Mehra and the marriage of sister Savita with Pran is in full swing, full of bonhomie and suspicion. Pran is a son of a minister, Mahesh Kapoor. The Chief Minister of Purva Pradesh with his senior colleague L.N. Agarwal and his old friend, Nawab Sahib are present at the
reception hosted at Prem Niwas, the residence of Mr. Kapoor. The stories of the Mehras and the Kapoors are linked together by two other major plots.

The another major plot of Chatterjee is concerned with three persons, Amit, Dipankar and Meenakshi. Amit falls in love with Lata Mehra. Meenakshi is already married to Arun Mehra and as such the Chatterjee plot is linked with Mehra plot. Lata is the daughter of middle class woman, Mrs. Mehra. Dipankar’s search for spiritual base i.e. spiritual joy and happiness in humdrum of modern life is contrasted with the materialistic search for a suitable boy for Lata by Mrs. Rupa Mehra.

The other major plot of the Nawab is concerned with the Nawab Saheb and Feroz. Nawab Sahib’s life story is intertwined with Mahesh Kapoor, for they are very intimate friends and inspite of the implementation of Zamindari Abolition Act, they remain good friends. Both are not involved in dirty politics and elections. Similarly, Firoz is an intimate friend of Maan Kapoor. In the end, Maan Kapoor in a drunken state fatally injures Firoz. Later, Firoz absolves Maan of this charge gladly.

All these major plots of the novel are well structured and connected by marriage or friendship. Dipankar’s search is for spiritual happiness. Mahesh Kapoor’s search is for a political power-base and the Nawab Saheb’s search is for feudal stability. All their ambitions are confined to the brief span of time i.e. 1951 and 1952, the period of a new-free nation embarking on the path of finding a stability and prosperity, internally and externally footing among the nations of the world. India was searching within itself and outside itself. The new suitability of the country moving towards democracy, but the old institutions such as family,
joint family, feudalism, strong family bond, traditions, customs, rituals and an “arranged marriage” system etc. find their way.

The most significant, towering and popular personality in India’s political history after Mahatma Gandhi is Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, and the character of L.N. Agarwal, in fact enlarges the brief presence of Nehru in the novel. What would be Free India in future, externally and internally, is presented through the speech of Pandit Nehru at Baitar and his letters written to the Chief, Ministers of the States, periodically. Later on Pt. Nehru’s speech prophetically foretells the policy of non-alignment which India envisaged afterwards and followed in future. Nehru says in his speech: “Here at home also, we must live in peace. As tolerant people we must be tolerant... Disaster will strike the country if religious bigots and communalists of all descriptions get their way.” (1240). Pt. Nehru in a letter dated 9 August 1951 addressed to all Chief Ministers says:

“Sometimes it is said that might be bad elements among the Muslims who might give trouble. . . .

We must give full protection to our minorities. This means also that we must not permit any propaganda on the part of Hindu and Sikh communal organizations, which is on a par with Pakistan propaganda on the other side.” (976)

The India’s quest for domestic and foreign policies begins with the victory of Indian National Congress Party under the leadership of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in 1952. India became a secular and non-aligned nation. India’s search for a stability and progress is interwoven with the search of Mrs. Mehra for a suitable boy for Lata. The clash between the Tandon faction and the Nehru faction, the traditionalists and the progressives respectively in Congress party has its echo in
the minds of Mrs. Mehra and Lata, whether to choose progressive youngman like Kabir or Amit or a orthodox and traditionalist like Haresh.

Dipankar’s search for a spiritual happiness base, meandering through zigzag ways, through Aurobindo and Sanaki Baba, “who is a man of great wisdom and sweetness and humours”. This linear progression from Aurobindo to Sanaki Baba and from Sanaki Baba to a service in Grindlay Bank, is Dipankar’s quest for a place not in spirituality but in a materialistic world of sound economics. Nawab Sahib’s quest is to save his lands from the Zamindari Abolition Act ends in fiasco and he finally take refuge into the world of meditation, prayer, reflection and reconciliation.

The sub-plot of the Pran-Mishra presents academic differences, and there is search—Whether James Joyce should be included in the syllabus or not? and whether Pran should be chosen as Reader in the Dept. of English, Brahmpur University or not? Pran represents modernity and Prof. Mishra represents orthodoxy. The selection of Pran for the readership and the inclusion of James Joyce in the syllabus of English literature are in fact a victory for modernity.

“*The plot is also full with the stories of strokes of fortunes, coincidence, sudden inheritance, long lost wills, such as the story of Saeeda. Saeeda plays a significant role in the novel and the readers are unaware of the reality that Tasneem is the daughter of the Nawab. The Nawab Sahib had been secretly helping her financially. All of a sudden, Tasneem is revealed to be his illegitimate daughter. The second surprise, in the novel is that the “Banaras people had decided that Maan was no longer a suitable boy; they had informed Mahesh Kapoor of their decision.”* (1341)

Lata too chooses her life-partner with great aplomb, rejecting Kabir Durrani and Amit, which was not an easy task. Maan Kapoor, the son of a Cabinet Minister, falls in love with a courtesan, Saeeda Bai. He visits Rasheed and his
family at Rudhia during the election period. He campaigns for his father. He is imprisoned for wounding fatally Firoz and finally, the Court on the evidence of Firoz acquits him. All these actions of Maan are the proof of his dashing deeds.

The writer says "this novel is linear partly because it is multi-linear. There are several plots in it." Viney Kirpal writes that in Third World novels:

"There is, first of all, the loose, circular, episode loop-like narrative technique of the third world novel that marks it off from the modern western novel."

The novel has a very long linear plot, which means it has a formal logic. Some digressions such as history of the political feud between Tandon and Nehru, the debates on abolition of Zamindari system in the Assembly, the incurable rhyming of the Chatterjees and the poetry reading at the Brahmpur Literary Society. But the major theme is the matrimonial quest of Mrs. Rupa Mehra, which is connected with the quests of many other characters, their lifestyles and mindsets. It is also the writer's quest, who was born in the year 1952, wants to find a niche in the history of Indian English Literature and life and as such presents his image of an ideal "suitable girl"! In brief, the novel has an Indian theme and the form is of Western novel.

The central character is Lata, who is the hero of the novel. She is only nineteen years old student of English literature at the University of Brahmpur. Her favourite writers are Jane Austen, Alfred Tennyson and Clough. Lata is named after "that most pliable thing, a vine, which is trained to cling first to her family, then to her husband". But her mother did believe that she is pliable. At her sister's wedding, she thinks seriously and deeply on how Savita and Pran met just for an
hour in her mother’s company, and wonders if she would have agreed to be
married off in such a hasty way. Kalpana Gaur, a close family friend describes her
as “attractive and smart”. She looks forward, she would lead a quiet, sober life in
the future”. Haresh finds her as an “intelligent woman without arrogance but also
an attractive woman without vanity”. Her best friend Malati Trivedi is bold and she
is a foil to Lata. Malati is one of the few girl students among five hundred boys in a
medical college. She is blunt and known for her outspoken views. She participates
in the political activities of the Socialist Party Students’ Wing and she has many
love affairs. She is a daughter of a surgeon. She also lost her father at a young age
and the bond of father’s loss ties Lata and Malati together. Malati’s mother teaches
her daughters to be independent and they were getting education in Hindi medium.
The daughters were learning English as well as classical music and dance. Malati
learns classical music under Ustad Majeed Khan. Malati’s mother is confident that
her daughter would find a suitable boy for herself. Malati was brought up in an
environment of woman where men were considered “exploitative and threatening”.
She believes that no man can come near the image she has of her father and
therefore keeps all men at a distance.

After Raghubir Mehra’s death, Mehra’s family lived on the financial help of
friends, so naturally “the sense of uncertainty and the consciousness of obligation
to others outside the family had its effect on them.” Lata was “brought up by her
mother not to give trouble but to take trouble”. Savita is determined never to be in
the same condition as her mother. When Pran develops a cardiac problem, Savita
realises that she cannot live in the world of dependence and uncertainty and as
such decides to study law. Her father-in-law, Mahesh Kapoor is in favour of
women’s education but not in favour of women doing jobs and earning money. He
tells Savita that she should concentrate on her duties as a mother. Surprisingly, Mrs
Kapoor demurs and Savita continues to study law despite her father-in-law’s strong opposition.

Lata’s first experience of love is with a dashing young man, Kabir Durrani, who is a student of history at the university. He is the son of a brilliant professor of mathematics. Their ‘passionate’ love is restricted to boat rides upto the Ganges and kisses. When she learns from Malati that Kabir is Muslim, her immediate reaction is that this fact would distress her mother. The name is symbolic. Kabir is a famous Indian Saint-poet, who is equally respected by Muslims and Hindus. Kabir is popular for his metaphysical and devotional poetry. He was born in a Muslim family and was weaver by profession. The people consider Kabir, Muslim as well as Hindu. She does not share her mother’s religious prejudices. Initially, Lata suggests to Kabir to elope. However, Kabir does not elope with her because he foresees the difficulties of an inter-religious marriage in the country and he has his own plan for his future. His ambition is to join the Indian Foreign Service. Her decision to elope with him seems to be impulsive. Kabir’s hesitation to make a commitment, and the time gap between his initial refusal to elope and her impassioned appeals to him, provides an opportunity to Lata think anew her love affair with him. With the passing of time, later on, in Lata’s life two more men come for asking her hand in marriage. The suspense of the novel hinges on: Who will be Lata’s final choice, her passionate lover, Kabir or worldly-wise, economically sound shoe-sales businessman, Haresh Khanna, or the Cambridge-educated writer, Amit Chatterji?

Haresh Khanna visits Brahmpur on business from the Cawnpore Leather & Footwear Company. He is B.A. (Honours) in English from St. Stephen’s College, Delhi, albeit with a third class. He also has a diploma in leather technology from
Midlands Technical College, England but Amit Chatterji has studied at Cambridge. In Brahmpur, Haresh meets Kedarnath Tandon, who is Mahesh Kapoor’s son-in-law. Kedarnath is also in the shoe business. He is a symbol of the generation that migrated to India at the time of partition in 1947. But his life is not embittered by the horrors and terrors of the communal riots. He lost everything in Lahore but he is permanently settled in Brahmpur in the polluting, caress-tainted shoe trade, a profession not typical to his caste. Kedarnath takes Haresh to visit the poor hutsments of the town where the untouchable cobblers, Jatavs live and work in vile and unsanitary conditions. Haresh witnesses the squalor of the home of Jagat Ram at Ravidaspur. He experiences the sickening conditions of a stinking tanning pit which are given in detail. The illiteracy, poverty, unhygienic and unsanitary environment and lack of discipline have moved his heart and he feels the need of a social change. He reflects:

"If he had his way and was given funds and labour, he would have this neighbourhood on its feet in six months. Sanitation, drinking water, electricity, paving, civic sense— (221)"

Haresh writes a diary for Orders, in which he mentions about his business activities as well as his impressions of those persons with whom he has come into contact. He writes elaborate and involved letters to Lata, which reveals Haresh’s personality. He is a minute and keen observer of Lata’s personality and other members of her family. He is an honest with Lata and confides that his love affair with Simran, a Sikh girl has come to an end. Simran’s family wanted that she should not marry Haresh because he is not a Sikh by religion. Haresh does not wish to uproot Simran from her family, and accepts the fate. He does not however elaborate on “his affairs with English girls abroad” (573). Mrs Mehra takes away
Lata from Brahmpur to Calcutta so that she is away from Kabir Durrani. The two lovers, Lata and Kabir are separated. Once again, Mrs Mehra is greatly disturbed at the interest that Amit Chatterji is showing in Lata. He is a Bengali and does not have Mrs Mehra’s approval. Mrs. Mehra leaves for Delhi in a serious search of a more suitable ‘Khatri’ boy of her caste. At the home of Kalpana Gaur, she is introduced to Haresh, and consequently arranges for Lata to meet him too. Haresh is impressed by Lata and perceives her as good “wife material” (597). In reality he does not ask for any dowry!

Lata’s first impression of Haresh does not fulfill with her image of “an ideal husband”. She finds the thought of marrying Harish, who is always chewing pan and wearing two-tone co-respondent shoes of brown and white, quite “ridiculous” (575). Lata notices that Harish’s Hindi and the local Midland’s dialect of England influence his accent. He is not “Westernised” in real sense. She is impressed that he does not attempt to play on “odious insincere charm”. With the passage of time Haresh gradually wins over Lata’s affection more through his correspondence with her and than in person. They meet five times in all and Lata comes to a final decision in favour of Haresh!

This historical novel focuses on the first few years after India’s Independence in 1947 to the First General Elections of 1952. It was a period of tumultus economic, social, political, cultural and communal upheavals. It presents social manners and lifestyles of the various classes particularly the middle class and their social and political crises. During the period Nawabs Jagirdars, zamindars, noblemen, rich persons usually used to visit the “Kothas” of Tauwaifs (Courtesan) in the nights to see dances particularly Mujras and hear songs, Urdu gazals and love poetry. It was a popular source of entertainment among the
gentries, Nawabs and Rajas. Sometimes these tauwaifs presented Mujra dance and sang gazals exclusively at the palaces and bungalows. The novelist portrays a beautiful courtesan and melodious singer, who presents her programme. These Tauwaifs or courtesan singers and dancers played a significant role in evolving the composite “Hindu-Muslim Culture” beside development of Urdu language and literature! It was a glorious period of bygone days of India.

It was a period when common people have great hope of early bright future but with the passage of time there was also despair, discontement, disappointment, bitterness and cynicism among the youth. Student riots and protests were taking place in Indian cities but still the common folk had great faith in the charming personality of Nehru.

The writer portrays realistically the Indian society as well as some significant events of the period largely due to his meticulous research. The writer took eight years to complete the manuscript of the present book. He is indebted to a young research scholar, Priya Jayakumar. He helped the writer in the fieldwork to meet freedom fighters and also the people who used to visit Tauwai’s Kothas at night regularly. He also met those persons affected by the abolition of Zamindari system i.e. tenants as well as Zamindars. The writer visited and stayed at many places such as Agra, Banaras, Allahabad etc. and with a shoe-making family in Agra. He also visited and stayed at countryside. He did intensive research to collect the raw material for the novel. He also read official reports on the Pul Mela disaster, debates in Indian Parliament on the Zamindari Abolition Bill, arguments in the High Court and debates on the language issue in the legislature. The writer also mentions about the “Tragedy King” of Indian films, Dilip Kumar and there is reference to popular Hindi films of the 1950s with social themes such as
Deedar, Sangraam, Kaale Badal and Hulchul. In brief, no stone of social life of post-Independent India in the early years is left unturned by the writer.

It is said “India is mysticism” and “Indian Woman too is mysticism” and so far no Indian, a mystic, a seer, a philosopher, a king, a politician or a poet has understood India and Indian woman completely. It is the novelist’s attempt to understand India and Indian woman by writing a novel!

For the first time after thousand years of monarchy, the country came under democracy and the Indians tasted the sweet and bitter fruits of democracy. It was an age of transition. Indians got freedom from the colonial rule and the country adopted its own Constitution with equal Fundamental Rights which includes freedom of speech, profession, equality, liberty, fraternity irrespective of religion, caste, creed and culture. India’s ideal is to become a Social Welfare State. There is no religion of the State though followers of Hindu religion constitute a majority. There are other major religions such as Sikhism, Christianity, Judaism (Jews), Zoroastrianism (Parsis), Jainism, Buddhism and Islam. India became a Secular State in a sense that all religions have equal status.

The British colonial rule of the country began in 1857 and it came to an end in 1947 and it got freedom but at the same time unfortunately, it was partitioned into Two Nations. At the same time as per the agreement between British Government and the Rulers of the Princely States in 1857, all the princely states within the country also became automatically free with the freedom of the country. There were more than 500 big and small Princely States in India. These princely States were given option to merge with either of the two new born nations. The States of Hyderabad, Bhopal, Gwalior, Mysore, Jammu & Kashmir, Junaghar,
Rampur etc. and all other small princely states joined India. The new Constitution of the country came into force from 26th January 1950 and the country became "The Indian Union Republic". The members of the Constituent Assembly took great care and every precaution in framing the Constitution of India so that there should not be any further partition or division of the country in future. They made India politically a Federal Country with a strong centre to safeguard the unity of the country. Hence, the Indian Union Republic is like the United States of America but politically speaking unlike U.S.A., India adopted a Federal Structure with a Strong Centre.

The novel is primarily about the social, cultural, lingual religious, new political institutions and experiment of democratic system in a Secular State. There is separation of politics from religion besides joint family system, constraints of family institution in India and her people with large number of characters from different strata of society serving as tools to illustrate the veracity of customs, traditions and institutions, all are presented in the novel.

India adopted the principle of "Government of the people, by the people and for the people", through electoral ballot system but the majority of people were illiterate. In India for centuries feudal system comprised of big and small landlords i.e. Jagirdars and Zamindars were the owners of agriculture land and tillers of the agricultural land continued to be tenants and mere labours. The plight of tenants and labours was miserable. Indian National Congress Party led a successful non-violent movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi though Neta Subhash Chandra Bose's violent movement for freedom of the country and his Indian National Army too played a significant role in freedom movement. Since ages India is suffering from cancerous diseases such as caste-system, poverty and
illiteracy and British rule added more ills such as bureaucracy-corruption, communal riots, social, political ---corruption and above all “split” and “disunity” (Phoot) among the people. So when India became a free country, it inherited all these dangerous diseases. When Britain transferred political power to the Indian National Congress Party, the new Govt. made various promises to bring reforms for the good of common people, particularly poor farmers, tribes, down trodden, untouchables, lower castes, minorities and have nots.

The Zamindari Abolition Act was a sincere attempt to raise the standard of living of an agrarian community, which constitute 80% population of India. It was passed in order to deprive Zamindar’s powers, by taking away the right to collect revenue and also right of ownership of the land. The law ensured that any tenant who had been tilling the same field for more than a certain number of years would be given the title of ownership of the agricultural land. After passing of the Bill in assembly, when it became an act, it was challenged in the courts but it was declared valid by High Court as well as Supreme Court. However, on implementation, it particularly failed to make a visible difference in the lives of the poor peasants in the short term, for different reasons such as a lack of will in the Congress Party to enforce the rules and shortcomings in the law. The loopholes in the law were exploited by Zamindars. Even now, the majority of the India’s population, the means of livelihood is agriculture and the farmers’ land holding is small. The novelist depicts rural India very briefly.

The author in his novel by depicting the rural world has widened the scope of the modern Indian English fiction. He splits the Zamindari abolition sub-plot into two areas, the village of Debaria and the city of Brahmpur. The city-based narrative depicts the culture of men-of-letters, artists, particularly poets, singers,
dancers, musicians and courtesans who were dependants on the patronage of Zamindar and whose existence was threatened by the abolition of the Zamindari system. It is a reality that land-reform legislation did not radically change the inequality in the prevailing society of the time. Zamindars were rulers of very big areas consisting of large number of villages. The implementation of this Act was delayed by litigation in the courts. The Zamindari Abolition Bill was presented in the Purva Pradesh Legislative Assembly and there was heated discussion. Begum Abida of Democratic Party, who belongs to the family of Nawab, was against such law and she vehemently put forward her arguments in the Assembly. She says:

"How can Zamindars expect justice from this government ... It had been agreed that compensation was to be paid to landlords. ... deprived of their ancestral means of livelihood, ... we can expect in justice. But the amount that is being paid is a pittance—half of which we are expected, indeed enjoined, to accept in government bonds of uncertain date!"(280)

She further points out the after effect of the Act that:

"And even that bond-weakened pittance is one a graduated scale so that the larger landlords—many of whom have establishments on which hundreds of people depend—managers, relatives, retainers, musicians"—

A member of the assembly interrupts her speech and adds:

Wrestlers, bullies, courtesans, wastrels—

Inspite of interruption she continues her arguments and says:

"...will not be paid in proportion to the land that is rightly theirs. What will these poor people do? Where will they go? The Government does not care. It thinks that this bill will be popular with the people and it has an
eye on the General Election that will be taking place in just a few months. That is truth of the matter." (280)

In her speech Begum Abida also points out the valuable contributions made by Aristocrats, Jagirdars and Zamindars:

"The class of people who preserved the culture, the music, the etiquette of this province is to be dispossessed, is to be driven through the lanes to beg its bread. But we will bear our vicissitudes with the dignity that is the inheritance of the aristocracy." (280)

Begum Abeda continued her speech. She further tells that:

... we will fight for justice, yes, before the bench and in the press ... (281)

She gives a realistic Indian National picture of the country after freedom when it came under the rule of Congress Party:

"It is three years since the country obtained Independence but, look at the poor of the land: They have neither food to eat nor clothes to wear nor shelter to protect themselves from the sky. They promised Paradise and green gardens under which rivers flow, and gulled the people into believing that the cause of their pitiable condition was Zamindari. ... The Congress Govt. is dispossessing eight lakh people, and openly inviting communism. The people will soon find out who you are." (285)

Begum Abida realistically points out their noteworthy, valuable contribution to the society and the country at large. There are many great works done by Aristocrats, Zamindars, Rajas and Nawabs:

"We have made our contribution, a contribution that will long outlive us, and that you cannot wipe away. The universities, the colleges, the traditions of classical music, the schools, the very culture..."
of this place were established by us. ... The Barsaat Mahal, the Shahi Darvaza, the Imambaras, the gardens and the mansions ... (286)

After her speech, Devakinandan Rai, a member of Socialist Party comments that so far the aristocrats and Zamindars have not worked to earn daily their bread and butter but now:

“She and those of her class would certainly have to work for it”

Nawab Saheb of Baitur was also present in the Visitors’ Gallery of the Assembly. He was listning invently the debate on the Bill. Nawab Saheb was thinking and his mind was full of thoughts. He reminiscences:

“Since the annexation of Brahmpur by the British in the early 1850s the Nawabs of Baitar and other courtiers of the erstwhile royal house of Brahmpur had not even had the psychological satisfaction of serving the state, a satisfaction claimed by many aristocracies widely separated in space and time”...(284)

The Nawab Sahib was compelled to admit the question of competence. Most Zamindars couldn’t hardly administer even their own estates and their Munshis (Estate Managers and Administrators) looked after these Jagirs and money lenders financed them. For most of the landlords the primary question of managment was not indeed how the finance will increase their income but how to spend it. Only few Zamindars invested in industry or business. Some had spent it on music, books antiques, relics, manuscripts etc. After a lengthy debate, the Speaker of the Assembly in conclusion said:
The motion was put and the House passed the bill by a large majority, consisting mainly of the Congress Party, whose numbers dominated the House" (287)

The President of India, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, whose father, was a Munshi of a Zamindar, gave his assent to Purva Pradesh Zamindari and Land Reform Act of 1951. Its Constitutional validity was challenged in the High Court at Brahmpur and it was heard by ‘the bench of five judges’ which included a judge, who was an Englishman and it was headed by the Chief Justice of High Court. There were two dozen or so Writ Petitions submitted by ex-Ruler Raja of Marh, Landlords, Religious Endowments etc. The Advocate-General of the Purva Pradesh was Mr. Shastri and on behalf of the petitioners, a famous lawyer, G.V. Bannerji appeared. The case was heard for many days and there were arguments before the bench which were concentrated on Articles 14,31(2), and 31(4) of the Constitution of India and finally the Chief Justice pronounced the seventy-five-pages judgement—which says:

"The Purva Pradesh Zamindari Abolition and Land Reform Act does not contravene any provision of the Constitution is not invalid---"(755)

Later, the Jagirdars and Zamindars appealed against the High Court’s ruling in the Supreme Court of India, which after hearing the arguments upheld the decision of High Court. The novelist mentions in brief the other important pillars of a democracy including, independant and fair judiciary, to interprete functioning of Constitution and a free press which is watch-dog that can criticise the executive. The depiction of the passage of the Bill through the courts, reveals that judiciary is completely independent and free with no political pressure. The press does not find a significant place in the novel.
Maan Kapoor, son of Mahesh Kapoor, the Cabinet Minister, who was the architect of the Zamindari Abolition Bill, visits to the village of his friend, Rasheed and sees there the after effect of the legislation. When he first visits the village of Debaria, Rasheed’s father and grandfather are acting on the assumption that Act will be implemented and are planning accordingly. Kachheru, the lower caste, cobbler, the poor farmer and the family’s old tenant has tilled the same land for years and so under the Act would get the right to become the owner of the land but when Rasheed’s father learns of the impending legislation, he calls the village Patwari, (Land Record Keeper) to alter official records to show that the agriculture land as having been tilled by Rasheed rather than Kachheru. Rasheed tries to ensure that the legislation should take effect by secretly visiting the Patwari and having the records changed back again to show Kachheru as the tiller of the agriculture land. The village Patwari suspecting that Rasheed’s instructions may not have the approval of his family, reversed the entry to the original. The entire family was very angry with Rasheed. They threatened him to strip off the right to inherit the land and property. In the meantime, they turned Kachheru off his land and he became a destitute. He did not file a suit in the court of law or initiate any other action to get back the land he has tilled for a long period. Rasheed, having his family’s wrath and inadvertently provoked the ruin of the poor tenant Kachheru whom he was trying to protect, turns mad and later on commit suicide. The Zamindar is left with his land intact but no son to inherit it! It is the only major sub-plot which ends in disaster.

Kachheru is portrayed in two consecutive chapters. Kachheru is symbol of a weak farmer with poor accommodation, unhealthy enviornment, no proper drinking water, inhygienic conditions, inadequate dress, diet and hard labour. By the end of a day’s ploughing, Kachheru’s:
"face was flushed red. His feet, callused and cracked though they were, felt as if they had been boiled. After a short day's work he usually shouldered the plough himself as he drove the cattle back from the fields. But he had no energy to do so today and gave it to spent cattle to haul. Hardly a coherent thought formed itself in his mind. The metal of his spade, when it touched formed shoulder accidentally, made him wince."

(534)

There was no possibility for Kachheru to initiate collective action against the Zamindar. The extreme measure taken by the Zamindar to avoid losing the lands on enforcement of the Act might have forced the tenants to initiate a collective action but there were no sufficient farmers in the village of Debaria to make this possible Kachheru had no group of such poor farmers otherwise such group might have been able to obtain some power in the village to make some choices or challenge it the court of law or negotiate with Zamindar. Kachheru is the only character, who has no friends, only a wife and an absent son. He is described as a lowercaste "Chamar" by caste but he is never portrayed with other persons of his caste. The description of the village geography which is limited and locations of the action mentioned are Rasheed’s family home, Kachheru’s hut, the village Patwari’s Office, the agriculture land, where Kachheru works for Rasheed’s father and the field where he has planted two trees. There are also some other places such as a hut on lower ground, which flooded in the rainy season, some roads, a school and a mosque. Northern India under the British Rule had been subjected to the Zamindari System, whereby Zamindars collected rent for themselves and revenue for the government. The Zamindar had enormous power. If a tenant did not pay up, the Zamindar had the right to evict him from the land, which means that he and his family were deprived of means of livelihood. Nawab Sahib’s Munshi threatened
the poor tenant but Maan Kapoor intervened and grabbed the Munshi by throat. In addition to paying rent, tenants were often asked to work for free. These harsh realities and miserable conditions of the poor are reflected.

"It was expected of Kachheru that whenever there was rain during the dry summer months he would go for the next day or two into his master’s fields and plough them while there was still water in the soil [...]. It was exhausting labour, and it was not paid for." (531)

The tragic drama of landlord versus poor farmer is played out in the mind of Rasheed, who is a communist. He is caught in a dilemma:

..."torn between family shame and family pride, forced to choose between loyalty and justice, between trust and pity, what must he have been through? Was he too not a victim of the tragedy of the countryside" (1182)

Rasheed’s mind is tormented and as such he cannot resolve this social conflict. Consequently he turns mad and the outcome of madness is suicide. Vikram Seth very briefly portrays Rasheed’s suicide scene. Rasheed’s sacrifice does not provide a solution to the problem as it is only negotiable within the dynamic of society. But the push for that change should have come from the bottom i.e. the poor landless farmers, which is missing.

During 19th century and first half of 20th century Urdu language evolved and emerged as a language of “Composite Culture of Hindus and Muslims” and upto India’s Independence on 15 August, 1947, Urdu played a significant role in Freedom Movement and it was the language of Indian masses, who cried for “Inquilab” (Revolution) throughout the country in villages, town and cities. All Fine Arts-Poetry, Literature, Music, Dancing, Sculpture, Architecture, Painting
were patronized by Rajas, Kings, Nawabs including Aristocrats, Jagirdars and Zamindars, and the merge of all the Princely States into Indian Union after freedom was a great blow to all the artists.

Urdu Language, Dancing, Songs particularly Urdu Ghazal, love poetry etc. still flourished before the abolition of Zamindari System. The novelist portrays courtesan Saeeda’s singing of gazals to the selected audience in a realistic manner. It was a social reality of the age that Dances, Mujras, Mushairas (Poet Gathering), Bait-Bazi, singing Gazals and such programmes were held at the Palaces, Havelis and bungalows of aristocrats, Rajas, Nawabs, very rich persons and noble families. The “Kothas” of Tauwaifs (courtesans) were centres of culture and all rich persons, noblemen, young and old used to visit them to see dances, particularly Mujras, hear gazals and love poems etc. during the night time. It was a matter of honour and dignity and the Zamindars, Jagirdars, Noblemen and rich persons and in fact they were proud of their visits to the Kothas of these Tauwaifs every night. This social and cultural reality of the age is not fully reflected by the writer. The novelist gives in detail the private programme of courtesan Saeeda at Prem Nivas of Mahesh Kapoor:

“ONLY a few words had emerged from that lovely throat when the ‘wah! Wahs!’ and other appreciative comments of the audience elicited an acknowledging smile from Saeeda. ... she certainly was, and yet in what did her loveliness lie? Most ... It being Holi, she began her recital with a few Holi songs. Saeeda Firozabadi was Muslim, but sang these happy descriptions of young Krishna playing Holi with the milkmaids of his foster-father’s village ...(81)

People came in and out of the courtyard during the recital. And Saeeda herself “enjoyed most of all singing the ghazals of Mir and Ghalib, but she also had a taste
for Vali Dakkani—and for Mast, a local favourite.” First she sang the ghazal of Mast, and the enraptured audience burst into a roar of appreciation.” When she said:

‘I do not stoop, yet find my collar torn. The thorns were here, beneath my feet, not there.’

(82)

“’Ah,’ said Mr. Justice Maheshwari helplessly, his head vibrating in ecstasy on his plump neck” she continued:

‘Can I be blameless when no voice will blame the hunter who has caught me in this snare?’

(82)

Saeeda looked at the poor eighteen-year-old boy, Hashim but he looked down immediately.

It was exclusively a “Private Singing Concert” by the courtesan Saeeda at the bungalow—“Prem Nivas” of Mahesh Kapoor.

“Lata looked at the young fellow with sympathy, and at Saeeda with fascination. ... But now she—like her sister—found herself enjoying the ghazal too, and also—thought it was strange to her—the transformed, romantic atmosphere of Prem Nivas. She was glad her mother was upstairs.” (83)

Meanwhile, Saeeda, sings on the Gazals of a local poet, Mast:

‘The pious people shun the tavern door—
But I need courage to outstare their stare.’

‘Through blinded by the sun I see, O Mast, The moonlight of the face, the clouds of hair.’

(83)
Maan was so affected by her recitation of this final couplet that he raised his arms helplessly towards her rustic nephew, aged seven. Then Saeeda asks his father, Mahesh Kapoor: “What will you listen to next, Maheshji?” … (84) There were cries of ‘No, no!’ ‘What are you saying?’ and ‘We are your mere shadows, Saeeda Begum!’ she replies politely: “I know that it is not because of my voice but through your grace—and that of the one above—’ she adds, ‘that I am here tonight. I see your son is as appreciative of my poor efforts as you have been for many years. Such things must run in the blood. Your father, may he rest in peace, was full of kindness to my mother. And now I am the recipient of your graciousness?

(84)

On hearing this Mahesh Kapoor enquired: ‘Who has graced whom?’ (84). Lata looked at Maan in surprise. He caught her eye and winked and Lata could not help smiling back. Now that he was a relative, she felt somewhat easy with him. Her mind flashed back to his behaviour this morning and again a smile came on her face. Lata would never be able to hear Professor Mishra lecturing again without seeing him emerge from the tube as wet and pink and helpless as a baby. Saeeda looked at Hashim and recited the couplets:

‘Why should my heart not be tied to him?’
‘Today he is dressed in colourful clothes.’

‘How can I praise his fine taste in dress?
In appearance he is like a prince.’ (84)

In Urdu poetry like the Persian poets in the Middle Ages, a gazal was usually addressed to a young man. She looked at Hashim and recited:

‘Your red lips are full of nectar.
How rightly you have been named Amrit Lal!’

(85)
Hashim’s friends were by now convulsed with laughter. But perhaps Saeeda was half-asleep somewhere at the back. One of his friends rubbed his palm gently along Hashim’s cheek and sighed strikingly. Blushing, Hashim got up to leave the courtyard and took a walk in the garden. He was only half on his feet when Saeeda fired a barrel of Ghalib at him:

“At the mere mention of my name in the gathering she got up to go.....”

Hashim almost in tears, did adaab to Saeeda, and walked out of the courtyard. Lata’s eyes were shining with excitement, felt sorry for him. Soon she was to leave with her mother, Savita and Pran. Saeeda was not only a good singer with golden voice but also her comments were full of wit and wisdom. Maan, on the other hand, did not feel at all sorry for his lily-livered rival. He came forward, and with a nod to the left and the right, and a respectful salutation to the singer, seated himself in Hashim’s place.

Saeeda smiled at him and said:

‘By no means forsake constancy, O heart,  
For love without constancy has weak foundations.’

On hearing the couplet’, Maan replied instantly and stoutly quoting the famous couplet of Dagh:

‘Wherever Dagh has sat down he has sat down.  
Others may quit your assembly, not he!’ (86)

There was laughter from the audience, but Saeeda decided to have the last word by repaying him in his own poet’s couplet:

‘Dagh is ogling and peeping once more.  
He will trip up and get ensnared somewhere.’
The private singing programme was at its zenith. "At this just response the audience burst into spontaneous applause. Maan was as delighted as anyone that Saeeda Firozabadi had trumped his ace." (86)

Saeeda remarked: "I hope that half that applause was intended for my witty young friend here." (80)

Maan replied with playful contrition: 'Ah, Saeeda Begum, I had the temerity to banter with you but—all my arrangements were in vain.' (87)

The audience laughed again, and Saeeda rewarded this quotation from Mir with a lovely rendition of the appropriate ghazal:

'All my arrangements were in vain, no drug could my malady.  
It was an ailment of my heart that made a final end of me.  
Why do you ask what has become of Mir's religion, his Islam?  
Wearing the brahmin's mark he haunts the temples of idolatry.'

(87)

The singing programme of Saeeda continued. The novelist reflects 'The night continued with alternating banter and music. It was very late now; the audience of a hundred had thinned to a dozen. But Saeeda was now so deep in the flow of music that those who remained spellbound. They moved forward into a more intimate group. Maan did not know whether he was held there more by his ears or by his eyes.' (87, 88)

Finally Saeeda recited a couplet of Mir Taqi Mir:

'Now Mir takes his leave from the temple of idols—  
We shall meet again...' (88)
Maan completed the couplet: ‘... if it be God’s will.’

During the 1950’s people liked to hear Classical Music and see Classical Dances, young boys and girls from gentry were learning Classical Songs and Classical Music from the Classical Singers and Musicians. The novelist portrays house of Ustad Majeed Khan. The students still waiting for their lessons. It was very far from his mind that the words were addressed to the dark god, Krishna, asking him to wake up with the arrival of morning, or that ‘Bhairava’—the name of the raag he was singing—was an epithet of the god Shiva himself. The novelist writes: “This morning too, Ishaq Khan Saeda’s Sarangi player had gone down to the AIR office- and tried his luck by talking to an assistant producer of Music to get his sister’s husband transferred from Lucknow to Brahmapur but to no avail.” (297)

Ishaq Khan was sitting in All India Radio’s Canteen. There were large number of persons and: “One of them had a radio switched it on to the only station they could receive clearly, which was their own. ... Ustad Majeed Khan singing Raag “Miya-ki-Todi” filled their ears. ... It was glorious music: grand, stately, sad, full of a deep sense of calm. They stopped gossiping and listened. ... Ustad Majeed Khan, the clean unfolding of the “raag” occurred through a very slow rhythmic ... After about fifteen minutes ... Ishaq Khan turned off the radio and sat still, deep more in trance than in thought.” (297)

It reveals that during those days’s girls, women, boys and youngmen from noble families were learning music and it also reveals people’s love for song and music. The novelist narrates the situation: “Moto Chand adjusted the pitch of his tabla accordingly. ‘Now which raag was I teaching you—Bhairava?’ asked Ustad
Majeed Khan. ‘No, Ustad Sahib, Ramkali,’ said Malati, gently strumming the
tanpura which she had laid flat on the rug in front of her. (294)

‘Hmmm!’ said Ustad Majeed Khan. He began to sing a few slow phrases of
the raag and Malati repeated the phrases after him. The other students listened
intently. From the low notes of the raag the Ustad moved to its upper reaches and
then, with an indication to Moto Chand to begin playing the tabla in a rhythmic
cycle of sixteen beats, he began to sing the composition that Malati had been
learning. Although Malati did her best to concentrate, the entrance of two more girl
students, who paid their respects to Ustad Majeed Khan before sitting down,
distracted her. Clearly Ustad Majeed Khan was in a very fine mood once again. At
one point he stopped singing and enquired about her ambition. She said that her
ambition was to become a doctor. He advises her that Music requires as much
concentration as surgery. One can’t disappear for a month in the middle of “an
operation” and take it up at will. The novelist describes the talk between the
students and the teacher:

‘Yes, Ustad Sahib,’ said Malati Trivedi with the
suspicion of a smile.
‘A woman as a doctor!’ said Ustad Majeed Khan,
musing. ‘All right, all right, let us continue—which part
of the composition were we at?’ (294)

Veena and Malti both were also learning Classical Music. “The next student
was the boy. He had a good voice and had put in a lot of work between lessons, ...
Ustad Majeed Khan treated him rather abruptly. ... The boy left as soon as his
lesson was over...Meanwhile, Veena Tandon entered, sat down, and began to
listen. ... a friend of Lata’s.” (293)
The lady said that her husband would prefer her to sing not Classical Music but Rabindra Sangeet. Ustad Majeed Khan said that the music of Rabindranath Tagore’s songs is not melodious than the beauty of “classical Khyaal”. He expected that her husband would be asking her to sing a Ghazal for him next time. Ustad Majeed Khan, apropos of his earlier lesson, said: ‘the boy has a good voice and he works hard, but he sings as if he were in church. It must be his earlier training in Western Music. It’s a good tradition in its own way,’ he went on tolerantly.

During 1950’s watching the films was one of the major forms of entertainment among the middle class people. Pran, Savita and Mrs. Rupa Mehra were looking at the newspaper Brahmpur Chronicle. Pran suggested to see Ashok Kumar’s Sangraam. Then they talked about Kaale Badal. It is an epic of love and romance. Meena, Gulab, Jeewan, etc., etc., even Baby Tabassum!

Then Pran gave detailed about the film Hulchul with Nargis—Sitara, Yaqub, K.N. Singh. It was shown at the Majestic Cinema House. And finally they had talk about Dilip Kumar’s film Deedar Pran informed the details of the film: “—Nimmi, Dilip Kumar—” (amazing luck, Ma) “—Yaqub, Baby Tabassum—” (we’ve hit the jackpot) “—Musical-Miracle songs which are sung in very street of the city. Acclaimed, Applauded, Admired by All. The only Picture for Families. A Storm of Movie. A Rainfall of Melody. Filmkar’s Deedar! Star-studded Gem amongst Pictures! No Greater Picture will come your Way for So Many years.” Well, what do you say? THAT afternoon the four of them went to warm their cockles at Manorma Talkies.”(134)
The novel portrays another social reality of the time i.e. “Purdah” system which was strictly observed by Indian women. All Muslim women as well as Hindu women from noble families observed purdah. The novelist has not pointed out this social reality about the Hindu women. Maan Kapoor informs that: “The Begum Sahiba – the Nawab of Baitar’s wife and the mother of his daughter and twin sons – had maintained strict purdah throughout her life.” (103)

Profession and faith, they do not make difference or sway from their professionalism to their faith. Both things that are in unison at the same time apart in their dissociation they are associated. The novel portrays that a courtesan, Saeeda like a faithful Muslim also used to offer prayers (i.e. Namaz) five times a day in an inner room exclusively reserved for her prayers:

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate
Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all Being,
the All-Merciful, the All-Compassionate,
the Master of the Day of Doom.

Thee only we serve; to Thee alone we pray for succour.
Guide us in the straight path,
the path of those whom Thou hast blessed,
not those against whom Thou art wrathful,
not of those who are astray. (117)

But through this, and through her subsequent kneelings and prostrations, one terrifying line from the Holy Book Quran recurred again and again to her mind. “And God alone knows what you keep secret and what you publish.”

The novel also points out that during that age books on Black Magic were popular and readily available in the market: “There was even a pavement stall with
books about birds. Ishaq picked up a filmsy, blunt-typed paperback about owls and spells, and looked idly a book of Hindu black magic, *The Tantra of Owls*, though it was printed in Urdu*. (111) Ishaq Khan reads: “Sovereign Remedy to Obtain Employment: Take the tail-feathers of an owl and a crow, and burn them together in a fire made from mango wood until they form ash. Place this ash on your forehead like a caste-mark when you go to seek employment, and you will most certainly obtain it.”

He frowned and continued to read further: Method of Keeping a Woman in Your Power. If you want to keep a woman in your control, ... use the technique described below: “Take the blood of an owl, the blood of a jungle fowl and the blood of a bat in equal proportions, and after smearing the mixture on your penis have intercourse with the woman. Then she will never desire another man.”

Ishaq felt almost sick. These Hindus! He thought.”

(111)

One day Maan Kapoor brought “the brown cover in gold letters it said in Urdu: *The Poetical Works of Ghalib: An Album of Pictures by Chughtai*” and gave to Saeeda. Later on “Saeeda turned back to the covering sheet looked down at the Urdu couplet, then read it out:

‘The horse of time is galloping fast: let us see where he halts. Neither is the hand on the reins nor the foot in the stirrup.’”

(129)

Then Saeeda began to sing:

‘No grain of dust in the garden is wasted. Even the path is like a lamp to the tulip’s stain.’

“*The rose laughs at the activities of the nightingle—*
What they call love is a defect of the mind.”

(127)

After reading the poetry, there is a long conversation between Mann and Saeeda. Saeeda pointed out the disastrous after effects of Zamindari Abolition Act on the singers, dancers and artists and gave a befitting and thought provoking reply that: “It is very difficult to cut down a banyan tree, Dagh Sahib, especially one that has been rooted so long in the soil of this province. But I can hear your father’s impatient axe on the last of its trunks. Soon it will be torn from the earth. The snakes will be driven from its roots and the termites burned with its rotten wood. But what will happen to the birds and monkeys who sang or chattered in its branches? Tell me that, Dagh Sahib.” (355) It was One o’clock in the morning Saeeda said that she was now nearly asleep:

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‘If Mir so loudly goes on weeping,
How can his neighbour go on sleeping?’

(356)

The novel mirrors the political scenario of the period. At that time Indian National Congress Party was in power. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was the Prime Minister but internally the party was divided into three groups. The first group was of Leftist and supporters of Secularism and Socialism. The second was of Rightist Group, who believed in “Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan and Hindu Nationalism”. And the third was of Centrist in between Right and Left Wings of the Party. He points out the prevailing situation in detail.

Rafi Ahmad Kidwai was a wise, wily and playful politician from Uttar Pradesh. He was responsible for a spate of resignations from the Congress, including Mahesh Kapoor’s, was anathema to the Hindu-chauvinist right wing of
the party because he was Muslim and also he had twice orchestrated opposition to the attempts of Tandon to become President of the Congress Party. Tandon had been narrowly defeated in 1948 but narrowly won in 1950. The battle became bitter because of the fact that, whoever would control the Congress Party machinery at the top in 1951, would have control over the selection of candidates for the forthcoming 'First General Elections' in the country.

Tandon was an intolerant, rightist and extremist politician and he had chosen his own men as members of Congress Working Committee. Tandon believed that President of the Party had every right to advise and indeed control the Government headed by Prime Minister Nehru. On the other hand Pandit Nehru wanted to protect his policies and have complete freedom in running the Government. Apart from differences, on economic policies, Nehru Group and Tandon Group saw the Indian question of Indian Muslims in an entirely different light. The novelist point out that:

"One member of his (Nehru) Cabinet had resigned, formed his own Hindu revivalist party-- --- - --- ---"

(955)

Pandit Nehru was greatly disturbed man and so his supporters within the party. Like Mahatma Gandhi, he too believed in a strong, self-sufficient, economically, scientifically, and technologically progressive Secular India. The internal conflict within the party at the highest level body made him rather worried. Nehru was a true Socialist and Secularist in a sense that he firmly believed in equality of all religions in India. But there was a powerful group within the Congress Party who wanted to make Indian Union a Hindu State. The writer gives
the inner picture of the working of Nehru’s mind: “The thought of India as a Hindu State with its minorities treated as second-class citizens, sickened him.” (955)

Whatever political decisions and actions Nehru took during the period were bitterly criticised by P. Tandon as well as his right wing supporters. The novelist reflects that: “All these actions infuriated people who saw Nehru as a rootless, deracinated Indian, whose sentimental creed was a pro-Muslim secularism, and who was divorced from the majority of his own Hindu citizenry.” (955)

The activities of the national level leaders of Congress Party had its great impact on the ranks and files of all the States including Purva Pradesh. Mahesh Kapoor, State Minister belonged to the faction of Tandon. Mahesh Kapoor says that “The Congress is threatening to split down the middle, people are defecting left and right to this new party.’ He stopped, then continued with increasing emotions says that: ‘Everyone who is decent is leaving. P.C. Ghose has gone, Prakashan has gone, both Kripalani and his wife have gone. They are accusing us, rightly enough, of “corruption, nepotism, and jobbery”. ... And Nehru himself is threatening to resign from Congress. ... I am sick of the Congress Party, and I too am thinking of leaving it. ... (753) Mahesh Kapoor should have remained. His brain-child, the Zamindari Abolition Act had still to be declared valid by the Supreme Court and to be implemented. Mahesh Kapoor had taken a calculated gamble to try to prod Nehru out of the Congress Party. Or perhaps it had been not a calculated but a whimsical gamble.” (813)

Mahesh Kapoor had talk with Congress Stalwart, Rafi Ahmed Kidwai. The novelist writes that: “For the real gambler behind the scenes was the Minister of Communications in Nehru’s own Cabinet in Delhi, the adroit Rafi Ahmed Kidwai,
who, leaning on his bed like a genial, white-capped, bespectacled Buddha, had told Mahesh Kapoor (who had come to pay him a friendly visit) that if he didn’t jump out now from the drifting boat of the Congress Party, he would never be able to help pull it by its tow-rope back to shore.” (814 )

There is a detailed description of the talk between Rafi Ahmed Kidwai and Mahesh Kapoor, who decided to desert the Congress Party, “having finally taken the psychological plunge, wondered whether this might not be one of his more crazy and disastrous ones. For Nehru had shown no effective sign of leaving the Congress yet, despite the fact that it was his ideological supporters who were bleeding away. Rafi Ahmed Kidwai was sitting silent and smiling. He had a plan for the shifting shoals and currents of politics and they work waiting for right hour moment and appropriate chance. Finally Rafi Ahmed ‘Upon Mahesh Kapoor’s departure, he had given him a watch—the spring of Mahesh Kapoor’s own watch had snapped—and had said: ‘I guarantee that Nehru, you and I will fight from the same platform, whatever that may be. At thirteen o’clock on the thirteenth say of the thirteenth month, look at this watch, Kapoor Sahib, and tell me if I was not right.’ (814)

C. Rajgopalacharaya, Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya, Suchitra Kirplani, Meher Chand Khanna, Dr. Zakir Hussain, Abid Ali, Gulzari Lal Nanda et al.

Nehru had large numbers of followers and supporters on the top level of the party as well as on states level and he enjoyed a very vast following among the Indian masses across the country. “Nehru’s supporters were haemorrhaging away from his party as it drifted into its right-wing orbit, refused to leave the Congress or to take any positive action other than to plead, in meeting after meeting of the All-India Congress Committee, for unity and reconciliation. As he vacillated, his supporters floundered. Eventually, by late summer, a point of crises had been reached.” (956)

Acharya Kirpalan resigned from the Congress Party and joined Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party accusing the Congress Party of “Corruption, nepotism and jobbery” Kidwai did not resign from the party but was elected to the Executive Committee of the K.M.P.P.

All India National Congress Party’s higher body i.e. Working Committee met at Bangalore to discuss the prevailing turbulent political situation in the party. Some Resolutions were passed but Pandit Nehru was not satisfied. “Nehru, seeing at last that resolutions in his support were not enough, demanded something much more concrete: a complete reconstitution of the two most powerful committee—so as to reduce their domination by the right wing. At this, Tandon offered to resign together with the whole of his Working Committee. Fearing a permanent split in the Congress, Nehru backed down. A few more conciliatory resolutions were passed. Some pulled in one direction, another.” (956)
Later on Kidwai and Ajit Prasad Jain resigned from the Cabinet but Nehru pleaded them to reconsider their decision. The next day, they both announced that they had decided not to resign from the Cabinet after all and issued their statement explaining their decision was a startling one, coming as it did from two Ministers of the Government: “Is there a parallel in the world were the executive head, i.e. President of an organisation, is the very antithesis of everything that the organisation stands for? What is there in common between Shri Purushottamdas Tandon and the policies of the Congress—economic, communal, international and refugees? Even at this juncture when our ways parted, we wished and hoped that the working of the Congress would fall in line with its profession.” (957)

The internal feud of the Congress Party continued and it was leading to extreme. There appears to be no acceptable solution and there seems to be no possible compromise. The novelist says, “Tandon and the old guard, goaded by what perceived as rank disloyalty and indiscipline, demanded that Nehru called his Ministers to heel. There was no way that the dissidents could be allowed to function as Ministers and attempt at the same time to do down their own party. Nehru was forced, sadly, to agree. ... Nehru was weighed down by the his ideological opponents in his party had, in defeated him. They had elected Tandon, they had forced Nehru’s supporters to leave the Congress in droves and form a new opposition party, they had taken over the District Congress Committees and Pradesh Congress Committees and the Working Committee and Central Election Committee ... and they were poised to select their own conservative candidates for the impending General Election.

On 6th August, 1951 Nehru, sent his letter of resignation to the President of the Congress Party. Tandon replied to Nehru. The party issued the Whip. It
appealed Congressmen to remain united to face the situation externally and not to insist on resigning from the Working Committee and the Parliamentary Board and the issue is placed before Working Committee. There was anarchy in the Congress Party. The right-wing and left wing groups were busy in their political battle for show down. The novelist says that: “WITH every passing day, however, it became increasingly clear that the month-long deadlock could not be resolved except by some desperate expedient. Tandon refused to reconstitute the Working Committee at Nehru’s dictation, and Nehru rejected anything less he was to resign it.” (991)

Hectic political activities were in the progress among the top party bosses. The most unique Muslim politician and the only leader in the Indian National Congress Party, who did not recognize Pakistan till death, Moulana Abul Kalam Azad also resigned from the Congress Working Committee (C.W.C.) The novelist writes that: “Two days later, on Independence Day, Maulana Azad resigned from the Congress Working Committee. Just as the resignation from the Congress of the popular Muslim Leader Kidwai had stung Nehru into action, the resignation of the scholarly Maulana cemented it. Since it was largely these two leaders at the national level whom the Muslims looked to in their post-Partition uncertainty—Kidwai because of his own great popularity, not only among Muslims but among Hindus, and Azad because of the respect in which he was held and the fact that he had Nehru’s ear—it now appeared that the Congress was in danger of losing its Muslim following entirely.” (990)

S.S. Sharma made every possible effort to dissuade Nehru from what looked increasingly like a collision course between him and Tandon. In this, Sharma was one of many, for leaders like Pant of U.P. and B.C. Roy of West Bengal had
attempted to do the same. Large number of formulas were put forward but they were not acceptable to both the groups. Later Nehru declared in a public meeting that he wanted the All-India Congress Committee to make it explicitly clear which way the Congress should go and who should hold its reins. He was in a fighting mood as Tandon refused the saving formula proffered by his Working Committee. He was not willing to reconstitute the Working Committee but preferred to resign as President. Mediators tried for reconciliation between the rival groups but in vain. “Tandon stated that he could not accept these forced resignations. He repudiated any suggestion by Nehru that the Congress Working Committee he announced that if no acceptable formula could be reached by mediators, he would resign from the Congress Presidency the next day.” (992)

The Next day Prushottamdas Tandon resigned as a Congress President and Pandit Nehru was elected as President but Tandon: “In a noble gesture, which did much to assuage any residual bitterness— joined the Working Committee under the newly-elected Congress President, Jawaharlal Nehru. … Nehru had won”. (992)

During the period, every political party had its “youth wing”. The college students of the day were politically conscious of their rights and they were taking keen interest in politics and actively participating in politics. The novelist gives a picture of the Students’ Union Elections realistically: “AROUND the time of the elections to the Brahmput University Students’ Union there was a part of political activity both on and off campus. There was a great hodgepodge of issues: cinema concessions … solidarity with primary school teachers on the other; demands for more employment opportunities together with support for Pandit Nehru’s non-aligned foreign policy; amendments to the rigid code of conduct of the university—Hindi be used for the civil service examinations. Some parties—
believed that all India’s ills would be cured by a return to ancient Hindu traditions. Others insisted that socialism, left, was the cure-all.” (815)

The Students Union Wing of the Indian National Congress promised and declared that: “Give us time. We are the party of Independence, of Jawaharlal Nehru, not really of L.N. Agarwal. Even though things have not improved, they will improve if you continue to place confidence in us. If you change horses now, they assuredly will not.” (815)

But the students were against the Congress and “most students were not inclined to vote for the status quo. They did not trust the rulers for the future, which had shown no sign of competence in the past. They have not put forward any plan of action for betterment and progress of the students. The country had to beg even for foodgrains from abroad. The economy under-planned and over-planned lurched from crises. There were few jobs waiting for the students themselves after graduation.

Their post-Independence romanticism and of the young generation was transformed into discontentment and disillusionment which formed a volatile mixture. The Congress Party’s argument was rejected, and the Socialist Party won the election. Rasheed was on the party slate, and became an office-bearer. Malati Trivedi, who considered herself an unlikely socialist, but joined in for the enjoyment of it all and because she liked discussions and because some friends of her planned to join in the ‘victory-cum-protest’ march a week after the elections.” There was a “Protest March” by Students’ Wing of the Socialist Party against the Government: “The ‘protest’ part of the title came from the fact that the Socialist Party—march in protest against the low pay of primary school teachers. There
were over ten thousand primary school teachers, their salaries, were lower than those of village Patwaris...” (816)

The protesters went to meet the Home Minister to submit their Memorandum and later: “... ... A delegation of ten students (Rasheed among them) went to see the Home Minister, who was in charge in S.S. Sharma's absence. ....... ...” (816)

The Home Minister listened to their demands and said that they should talk with the Chief Minister on his return. Rasheed gave a fine reply. Rasheed told furiously, staring at the man, who had justified the police firing in Chowk, The British used lathis against students, they even shot at students during the Quit India Movement. The British here split their blood—in Chowk, in Captainganj in Brahmpur ... the rest of the delegation began to buzz angrily in response to his oratory.

Finally the Home Minister told them that: “I know exactly what march is about. It isn't about the salaries of primary school teachers. It is a way ofconcertedly attacking the Congress government of the state and the country, and trying to spread dissatisfaction and disorder in the town.’ He made a dismissive gesture with the back of his hand. “Stick to your books.”(817) •

Vikram Seth gives the list of Judges of Calcutta High Court which consists of 23 judges out of which 4 were Muslim but in 1948 List he says that “Half the English judges and all the Muslim judges had gone. There was not a single Muslim judge in the Calcutta High Court in 1948.” (471). The writer further remarks that: “The appointment of judges had always been a matter of the greatest importance for the British and indeed the administration of justice under the British had been honest and fairly swift.”(471)
It is a social reality that every year Hindu religious Yatras, such as Jaganath Rath Yatra, Puri, Tuljapur, Gajan Maharaj Palkhi etc. and “Jatras” (Fairs) are held in different parts of the country and lakhs of pilgrims visit these religious Fairs.

After a decade or two a religious fair “Kumbh Mela” on the bank of river Ganges is held and lakhs of Hindu devotees assemble to take a dip in Ganges on full moon night and perform rituals as river Ganges is considered holy river in Hindu mythology. In the second half of last century there was great tragic disaster of stampede in the Khumbh Mela and thousands of people were crushed to death.

Vikram Seth mentions in detail “Pul Mela” disaster in the novel and portrays fraud Swamijis, Sadhus and self styled holy men called “Babas” like Sanaki Baba. The novelist mirrors the scene realistically:

“Within fifteen minutes more than a thousands people were dead. Finally the police managed to communicate with the railway authorities and stop the trains. They set up barriers on the approach routes to the ramp and cleared the area below and around the ramp. The loudspeakers started telling people to go back, not to enter the mela grounds, not to watch the processions. They announced that the remaining processions themselves had been cancelled. It was still not clear what had happened. Dipankar had been among the spectators on the other side of the main route. He watched with horror the carnage that was taking place less than fifty feet away—but with the Nagas between him and the ramp, there was nothing he could do. Anyway there was nothing he could have done except get killed or injured. He did not recognize anyone on the ramp, so tightly packed was the crowd. It was a hellish scene, like humanity gone mad, each element indistinguishable from the other, all bent on a kind of collective suicide.” (734)
When Dipankar asks Sanaki Baba, he replies bluntly:

"... There was a flaw in the administrative arrangements" (749)

In Indian society, communal riots are undeniable reality. The novelist depicts the communal riot, its origin, causes after effects on the society. It is a recurring feature of Indian social life:

"Some riots are caused, some bring themselves into being. The problems at Mistri Mandi were not expected to reach a point of violence... ...the area around Kedarnath’s shop, was full of armed police. The previous evening there had been a fight inside a Cheap drinking place..." (229)

People were drinking wine and there had been a heated argument. The four drunken persons rolled on the floor, fighting. It ended with the man who had started the fight being beaten unconscious, and all of the other being injured. One was bleeding from the eye and screaming in pain. The novelist writes: "Surprisingly soon, every relevant authority knew about the matter: from the Superintendent of police of the district to the Inspector-General of Purva Pradesh, from the Home Secretary to the Home Minister. Everyone received different facts and interpretations, and had different suggestions for action or inaction." (230)

The Head Priest of Alamgiri Masjid delivered a fiery and inflammatory sermon on Friday weekly mid-day prayer. The novelist writes that: “He was choked with emotion. The construction of the Shiva Temple was going ahead. The Imam’s appeals to everyone from the Governor down had fallen on deaf ears. A legal case contesting the Raja of Marh’s title to the land contiguous to the mosque
has been instituted and was at present going through the lowest court. A 'stay order' on the construction of the temple, however, could not be immediately obtained—indeed, perhaps could not be obtained at all. Meanwhile the dung-heap was growing before the Imam's agonised eyes."

The congregation was tense already. Muslims in Brahmpur for over the months had seen helplessly the construction work of the foundation of the temple in the west of mosque. After the first part of the prayers, the Imam gave an inflammatory speech. His ordinary sermon used to be on personal morality or some aspect of life or cleanliness or alms or piety. He said that: "Their religion was in danger. The barbarians were at the gates. They prayed, these infidels, to their picture and stones and perpetuated themselves in ignorance and sin. Let them do what they wanted to in their dens of filth. Did the people of the faith gathered here in God’s presence know how it was planned to consecrate this Shiva-linga? Naked ash-smeared savages would dance before it—naked! These were the shameless, like the people of Sodom, who mocked at the power of the All Merciful.

... God guides not the people of the unbelievers.
Those—God has set a seal on their hearts, and their hearing, and their eyes, and those—they are the heedless ones;
Without a doubt, in the world to come they will be the losers. (233)

The Imam, further continued "we, who lived through hard and bitter times and have suffered for our faith and paid for our faith in blood need only remember the fate of the idolaters"

And they set up compeers to God, that they might lead astray from His way.
Say: "Take your joy! Your homecoming shall be—the Fire!!" (233)
A slow, attentive and shocked expectation filled the silence among the congregation that followed. The Head Priest pointed out that: “The Home Minister himself supports the temple committee—and its guiding spirit is the debauched Raja of Marh! Let it not happen that our holy places are to be polluted by the proximity of fifth—let it not happen—but what can save us now that we are left defenceless before the sword of our enemies in the land of the Hindus, what can save us but our own efforts, our own’—‘our own direct action—to protect ourselves will be with you.

Has thou not seen how thy Lord did with Ad,
Iram of the pillars,
the like of which was never created in
the land,
and Thamood, who hallowed the rocks in the valley,
and Pharaoh, he of the tent-peg,
who all were insolent in the land
and worked much corruption therein?
Thy Lord unloosed on them a scourge of chastisement;
surely thy Lord is ever on the watch.

... God, help those who help the religion of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon Him. May we also do the same. Make those weak, who weaken the religion of Muhammad. Praise be to God, the Lord of all Being.”... (230-234)

The Imam descended from the pulpit, and led the faithful into collective more prayers.

It is rather surprising to note that Vikram Seth had not given any such instigating, inflammatory and fiery speech of any Hindu religious fanatic leader, who supported the construction of “Shiva Ling” Temple on the West Side of the Mosque.
That evening there was a communal riot. Large number of police was stationed at sensitive points in Misri Mandi of Brahmpur. The situation was very tense. The District Magistrate was present and fifteen policemen left in the main police station in Chowk by evening. As there was call for prayer from the Alamgiri Mosque, the sound of a conch was also heard sometimes interrupting it several times. The writer points out in detailed that: “No one knew how the men who were gathering in the narrow alleys of the Muslim neighbourhood that lay on one side of Chowk became a mob were walking towards the mosque for evening prayer, then they had coalesced into larger clusters, Alamgiri Masjid Hifaaazat Committee made a few crowd-rousing remarks, a few local hotheads and tough stirred themselves and those around them into a state of range, the crowd increased in size. There were cries of ‘Allah-u-Akbar’ which could be heard all the way to do police station. A few of those who joined the crowd had stick in their hands. One or two even had knives. ...The District Magistrate first heard the coinciding sounds of the conch and the muezzin’s call to prayer. This worried him mildly. ... As the cries of ‘Allah-u-Akbar’ came closer, the D.M. urgently told the small force of twelve constables to stand with him in a line—rifles at the ready—before the foundations and rudimentary walls of the site of the Shiva Temple.” (236)

The novelist gives further details of the tense situation: “...At the last moment he gave the signal. The thirteen men roared and charged and fired. The wild and dangerous mob, hundreds strong, faced with this sudden terror, halted, staggered, turned and fled. It was uncanny. Within thirty seconds it had melted away. Two bodies were left in the street: one young man had been shot through the neck and was dying or dead; the other, an old man with a white beard, had fallen and been crushed by the retreating mob. He was badly, perhaps fatally, injured.
Slippers and sticks were scattered here and there. There was blood in several places in the alley.” (237)

The DM looked around at his men. A couple of them were trembling, most of them were jubilant. None of them was injured. He caught the head constable’s eye. Both of them started laughing with relief, then everything was peaceful and still. There is description of communal riot and it was worst of all. Moharram and Dussehra coincided that year. Hindus took out the Dussehra Victory Procession, and Muslims Tazia procession. The Dussehra procession was passing through the streets of Barhmpur and then: “... the procession wound its way through the labyrinthine alleys of Misri Mandi and the contiguous neighbourhoods. ...”

Moharram procession that was also passing through the streets of the city and then: “...suddenly Rama’s procession stopped, and the sound of other drums was heard together with cries of terrible grief and lamentation. ... They moved forward, tears coursing down their cheeks—(1056)

‘Ya Hassan! ‘Ya Hussain!’ ‘Ya Hassan! ‘Ya Hussain!’
‘Ya Hassan! ‘Ya Hussain!’ ‘Ya Hassan! ‘Ya Hussain!’ ”

...The desperate mourners thrust forward through the joyous celebrations.” (1057)

This atrocious and violent interruption –this mourning that made a mockery of the enactment of Shri Ramachandra Ji returning to his home, his brothers, his people, to establish his perfect reign was not to be borne. The monkeys, who had just been leaping about in uncontrollable joy, angrily threw flowers onto the Tazia, shouted and growled aggressively, and then stood threateningly around the
intruders who were attempting to force themselves across the path of Rama, Sita and Lakshman. The actor playing Rama himself moved forward in a motion. A chain lashed out, and he staggered back and he was wounded. The crowd went berserk crazed by this sight of the wounded actor Rama. The man with the fireworks seized a lathli from one of the organisers and led the crowd in a charge against the Tazia procession. Within seconds, tazia was smashed on the ground. Fireworks were thrown onto it and it was set alight. The crowd stamped on it and beat it with lathis until it was charred and splintered. Its horrified defenders slashed out with their knives and chains at these persons, who had desecrate the holy image of the tomb. The sight of the crushed and blackened tazia made them mad. Both sides now were filled with the lust to kill.

Then the crazed cries of ‘Allah-u-Akbar’ and ‘Har har Mahadeva’—as well as the screams of pain and terror were heard. Knives, spears, axe and lathis had appeared from the neighbouring houses, and Hindus and Muslims hacked at each other’s limbs, eyes, faces, guts and throats. One of the policemen was wounded in the back, the other managed to escape. But it was a Hindu dominated area and, after a few terrifying minutes of mutual butchery, the Muslims fled down sidelanes. Some were hunted down and killed but some escaped. The others rushed back in the direction from which they had come. Some persons ran forward towards the Imambara. They fled towards the people to seek protection among those of their own religion. They saw their friends and relatives killed and wounded—and are inflamed by them in turn.

Soon Muslim groups were seen roaming around other parts of Brahmpur setting fire to Hindu shops and murdering, any Hindu they could find. Meanwhile in Misri Mandi, three of the Muslim drummers who had been hired for the Bharat
Milaap lay murdered by the wall of the temple, their drums smashed in their heads half hacked off. Their bodies doused in kerosene and set alight. Mann and Firoz were sauntering along through the dark lane of Katra Mast to Misri Mandi.

The crowd was rushing down the lane now. The sound grew closer. Mann looked around Firoz in desperation. The shops were all closed their shutters down. There was no side-lanes within immediate reach. Maan told Firoz to run back towards Imambada as they were caught in a Hindu Mob on seeing them the mob said: "Mussalmans—kill them also." We’re not Mussalmans’ said Mann immediately; not looking at Feroz. A young man asked him to recite Gayatri Mantra”, which he did; ‘Now go … ....Jai Siyaram! Har har Mahadeva!” (1059)

The day was also celebrated as Bharat Milap because of coincidence of Dussehra and Moharram but it is ironical that there was communal riot. The Raja of Marh with the support of Hindu officials and Hindu politicians of the Purva Pardesh wanted to construct a Shiva Linga Temple on a piece of land adjoining to Mosque. The Raja’s attempt was to bring the Shiv-Linga, which was in the riverbed of Ganga to the site of his planned temple. So the Raja and his men surrounded by the pompous, plaintive, enchanted calls tried with the help of rope to lift the big Stone Shiva Linga from the riverbed Ganga but the Linga breaks the ropes lifting it from the original resting place. In reality, the Shiva-Linga rested on the riverbed of Ganga once more, the turbid waters passing over it, its bloodstains slowly washed away. The novelist points out the effects of religious fanaticism, which reaches its climax on the eve of Dussehra and Moharram. It also results in the communal riot in the city.
It also mirrors the social milieu of 1950’s India. The writer wishes self-respect, equality, human treatment and freedom of “untouchables” and lower castes. Rasheed is a son of landlord family and comes from the rural village Deboria. Rasheed a committed and is a progressive thinker. He is a communist. There are three separate wells for drinking water for higher castes Hindus, Muslims and lower castes Hindus (untouchables). These wells of drinking water are located near the tanning pit. The conditions of the villages were pathetic.

In India there is age-old social evil of hereditary caste system, rigid division of Hindu society into lower and higher castes ‘split in the society’. It reflects the prevailing social conditions of lower castes and downtrodden. Since ages cobblers known as Chamars, the lower caste persons have worked as the makers of leather shoes and chappals. When in the last century the factories producing footwears were established, many upper castes Hindus entered the profession of shoe making. Kedarnath takes up the carcass-tainted shoe business. He takes Haresh Khanna to Ravidaspur, a locality in Brahmpur, where the low caste people, Jatavs live in a poor, disgusting and insanitary environment. The novelist portrays their miserable conditions:

... “far more in sanitary, with sluggish sewage trickling along and across the line. Picking their way between flea-ridden dogs, grunting filth-spitted pigs and various unpleasant static objects, and crossing on open river on a rickety wooden bridge, they found their way to Jagat Ram’s small, rectangular, windowless brick and mud workshop.” (206)

It is a social reality that lower-castes people are not allowed to enter Hindus’ Temples and perform rituals or offer Poojas, and attend religious festival ritual ceremonies and marriage ceremonies of higher caste. Jagat Ram, a cobbler is the
representative of Jatav community. When the Ramlila procession on Dusshera eve is taken out in the city, he demands the participation of Jatavs in the festival at Misri Mandi. He tells Kedarnath: "Since the Brahmin strangle hold over the parts of heroes had been broken in favour of the other upper castes, it was logical next step to allow the so-called lower castes and scheduled castes to participate. They contribute to the success of the Ramlila as spectators and even to a small extent as contributions, why not than as actors. (1038)

It is evident that Jagat Ram, the spokesman of lower-castes does not agree with Mahatma Gandhi’s views on untouchability and solutions of problems of untouchables: "Even Gandhi, for all his reforming concern, for all his hatred of the concept that any human being was intrinsically so loathsome and polluting as to the untouchable, had believed that people should continue in their hereditary ordained professions: a cobbler should remain a cobbler, a sweeper a sweeper. "One born a scavenger must earn his livelihood by being a scavenger, and then do whatever else he likes. For a scavenger is a worthy of his hire as a lawyer or your President. That according to me, is Hinduism." (1039)

Jagat Ram, the leader of the Jatav community i.e. lower caste people who were called Chamars i.e. cloggers:"...knew that there was nothing innately worthy about cleaning lavatories or standing in a foul-smelling tanning-pit—and being duty-bound to do so because your parents had. But this was what most Hindus believed...". Jagat Ram hopes change in future but not immediate future "...and if beliefs and laws were changing, a few more generations would continue to be crushed under it finally ground to the bloodstained halt.""(1039)
Jagat Ram is of the opinion that: "...Nehru’s Law Minister Dr. Ambedkar, the great, already almost mythical, leaders of the untouchables, had asserted, Hinduism had nothing to offer those whom it had nothing to offer those whom it had cast so pitilessly out of its fold. He had been born a Hindu, Dr. Ambedkar had said, but he would not die a Hindu." (1039-40)

Jagat Ram further says nine months after Mahatma Gandhi’s murder the Constitutional provision abolishing untouchability was passed by the Constituent Assembly, and its members broke out into loud cheer of “Victory to Mahatma Gandhi”. He is of the opinion that the passing of constitutional provision abolishing untouchability by the Constituent Assembly is more due to Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar’s pragmatism than Mahatma Gandhi’s legalism. Jagat Ram, a lowcaste cobbler witnesses the marriage of Haresh Khanna and Lata Mehra from a distance because he is aware of the fact that the two worlds of higher castes and lower castes of the Hindu society do not mix. His presence at the house of Dr. Kishan Chand Seth, the venue of the wedding may cause some social awkward situation!

The writer also reflects realistically the supression of lower castes in the villages. The higher caste people’s ruthless oppression and crudities are gruesome. Untouchability is a crime against humanity. The novelist gives one such heart-moving incident of atrocity and inhumanity realistically:

“One of the Jatavs of his own village, who had spent a couple of years in Brahmpur, had gone back home during the harvest season. After the comparative freedom of city, he had made the mistake of imagining that he had gained exemption from the generalised loathing of the upper-caste villagers. Perhaps also, being
eighteen years old, he had the rashness of youth; at any rate, he had bought from his earnings. One day, feeling thirsty, he had the brazeness to ask an upper-caste woman, who was cooking outside her house set upon by a gang of men, tied to his bicycle, and forced to eat human excreta. His brain and his bicycle had been smashed to bits. Everyone knew the men who were responsible, yet no one had dared to testify; and the details had been too horrendous for even the newspapers to print.” (1038-1039)

Vikram Seth further points out the conditions of untouchables living in rural areas of the country: “In the villages, the untouchables were virtually helpless; almost none of them owned that eventual guarantor of dignity and status, land. Few worked it as tenants, and of those tenants still would be able to make use of the paper guarantees of the forthcoming land reforms. In the cities too they were the dredge of society.”(1039)

Vikram Seth, as a Guest Editor, Times of India, Pune dated 21st October 2005, has cautioned the World of Editors particularly Indians to take stocking in 2006, when there will be voluntary mass conversion of lower caste Hindus. They are now called ‘Scheduled Castes’; deprived community and they will be embracing Buddhism. He further cautioned that on two other fronts that India has to face- are population and terrorism. People throb in cities to groom their families after getting steady jobs. They never like upheavals in their lives after passing through the Golden Gate to City Safe and Sound.

The main theme of perennial interest of the novel is love and selection of a suitable boy and marriage of the heroine, Lata. Vikram Seth talks about “arranged marriage”, “love-affair”, “romance”, “encounter” etc. in the novel. Lata is a young girl of 19 years from a middle-class conservative, traditional and orthodox Indian
family. She is simple, innocent and virgin. She is undergraduate student of English literature at Brahmpur University, Purva Pardesh. She first falls in love passionately with a fellow student, a good cricketer, a son of a professor, Kabir Durrani. Later on, a poet-novelist and an idealist Amit, passionately loves her and she finally comes in contact with Harish Khanna, a businessman in shoe industry.

Lata is only three-dimensional character to a certain extent. She plays a dual role of being an individual person and a type character. Though it was the early dawn of newly got freedom but the Indian Women of 1950’s were aware of their rights and have started their own movement for freedom and equality on par with men in family, society and life. Malati says that: "This is a new age." She makes reference to the time, when Indian women’s were awakening and various emancipation movements have just begun. It was a time when women’s and wives’ roles in family and society had to be re-examined: without losing their individuality and femininity. They demanded the works and cores which had so far been exclusive reserved for the male "'Some day.' Said Veena. 'this country will have a woman Prime Minister or a woman President.'"...She is optimistic about future. (773&860)

Lata in marrying with Haresh fulfills her function as the ‘type’ character that accepts her Indianness. The significance is more social and less personal. Kabir is very attractive, masculine, passionate, and even Lata is not quite ready to reject Kabir. Her rejection of Kabir is repudiation of the love code. It is evident that Lata becomes psychologically complex only in her relation with Kabir. The romantic, impulsive Kabir kindles love in Lata’s heart without visualising what he will do with her aroused love as he was aware of his lack of financial stability; and the impracticality of an inter- religious marriage in India of 1950’s. When faced with
all these problems all of a sudden, Kabir is unable to find any solution, which makes Lata dejected, disgusted and rejected but still she is very much infatuated.

Savita is beautiful, intelligent and a woman of understanding with no vanity and she understands Lata’s feelings completely. She has acute perception of events and behaviour. She understands fully that what Kabir and Lata have for each other an intense passionate love. Lata was so relieved to talk to someone who loved her and understood her that she poured out all her hopes and visions of bliss. Savita saw at once how impossible these were but let Lata talk on. She felt increasingly gloomy as Lata grew more elated which is revealed through their conversation:

"‘But what should I do? Said Lata.’Do?’ repeated Savita give Kabir up immediately before their infatuation went any further, but she knew better than to say so to Lata, who could be very contrary". (174)

There is passionate love between Lata and Kabir. Lata renounces passion before she really gets the chance to taste its wild ecstasies of true passionate love. In the closest scene she comes to the consummation of her passion when Olivia in William Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night, she tells Kabir, who is playing Malvolio, "Wilt thou go to bed, Malvolio?" (781) a line which when she utters for the first time causes her great embarrassment. But it appears that Lata makes this rejection after a long mediation. Her relationship with Kabir has always been like she is being whirled around in a whirlpool. When she is with him she loses all her bearing and becomes an emotional wreck, which is too painful for her to bear and tolerate. The novelist gives the picture of the working of her mind. Lata says that: "... When I am with Kabir, or even away from him but thinking about him, I become utterly useless for anything. I feel I am out of control-like a boat heading for the rocks—and I don’t want to become a wreck" (1298)
Lata’s feelings for Kabir overwhelms her. Lata in reality loves Kabir passionately and the intensity of love is revealed from the letter in which she discloses to him about her two dreams:

_Dear Kabir,_

_“So you needn’t worry about my becoming passionately fond of you and sister brings all your plans for the Indian Foreign Service and Cambridge and the rest of it. If you think I was unreasonable, well, perhaps I was, but I’ve never been in love before and it is certainly an unreasonable feeling too—and one that I never want to feel again for you or for anyone. The second dream—we were lying together by ourselves on a boat far away from both shores, and you were kissing me, and—oh, it was absolute bliss. Then later you got up and said, ‘I’ve got to go now and swim four lengths; if I do, our team will win the match, and if I don’t it won’t,’ and you left me alone in the boat. My heart sank, but you were quite determined to leave. Luckily the boat didn’t sink, and I rowed it alone to the shore. I have decided to remain a spinster without encumbrances, and to devote my time to thinking about space, time and causality, evolution and value and the nature of God. So God speed, sweet prince, sweet Rat-prince, and may you emerge near the dhobi-ghat, safe but bed ragged and do brilliantly in life. With all my love too, my darling Kabir.”_ (459)

_Lata_

Vikram Seth reflects the meeting between the two lovers. He writes that:

Kabir entered the shop, looking quite cheerful. He noticed Lata and stopped. The whole of their last meeting flashed before Lata’s eyes—and immediately afterwards, their first meeting in the bookstore. They looked at each other for a few seconds before Lata broke their silence with a hello.
Then Kabir invited her for a cup of coffee and both went to a ‘coffee house’. There is conversation between them:

“Aren’t you going to say something?’ she asked him.
He shrugged.
‘Do you hate me?’ asked Lata. ‘Don’t you care whom I marry?’
‘Don’t be stupid.’ Kabir sounded disgusted with her.’ And please stop those tears. She did not try to wipe them away, nor did she take her eyes off Kabir’s face.
‘I know of two mixed marriages—‘ he began.
‘Ours wouldn’t work. No one else will let it work. And now I can’t even trust myself.’
‘Then why are you sitting here with me?’ he said.
‘I don’t know.’
‘And why are you crying?’
Lata said nothing.” (1286)

After the meeting Lata and Kabir walked away. Later—“she took a long walk near the banyan tree. She sat down on the great, twisted root, remembered their first kiss, read poetry, fed the monkeys, and fell into a reverie. Walks are my panacea, she thought, bitterly; and my substitute for any decisive action. The next day, however, she took action of the most decisive kind.” (1287-1288)

When her mother comes to know that Kabir is Muslim, there is conversation between Mrs. Rupa Mehra and Lata in the presence of Savita. The novelist writes that:

“By now Lata, having conjured up the image of Kabir in her mind, here gained a little strength. She opened her eyes. Her tears had stopped and there was a defiant set to her mouth...
‘I will marry him,’ said Lata, unilaterally.... 
‘I wish I had become a nun,’ said Lata. ‘I remembered Daddy used to tell us we should follow our own
Mrs. Rupa Mehra got infuriated and slapped Lata hard twice! Though Lata was drifting away from her lover Kabir and was moving towards Harish but she was unable to erase off the thoughts of Kabir from her mind. She was visualising to meet Kabir but she was unable to see him after final Exams. Kabir was always present in her mind. Lata says to herself that:

“If you love him (Kabir) so much, can you be happy to leave him miserable?
Where was he?...Kabir had as good as disappeared.
Whose is life am I living? Lata wondered. Was my acceptance just a reaction?
Despite Haresh’s encouraging letters and her own cheerful replies, Lata began to feel both uncertain and very lonely.” (1332)

Sometimes Lata sat on a banyan root and looked out over the Ganga and thought that: “would she have been happy with him(Kabir)? Or he with her (Lata)? He was so jealous now, so intense, so violent, so unlike the casual cricketer whom she had seen laughing and practising at the nets year ago.

Lata has decided to marry Harish but still she was unable to forget Kabir. The writers realistically mirrors her inner working of the mind:

“Two weeks more, she thought, and I will be the Bride of Good Year Welte. Oh Kabir, Kabir—she wept.
I should ruin away, she thought.
I should ruin away, she thought, far from Haresh, far from Kabir, far from Arun and Varun and Ma And the whole Chatterji’s clan, far from Pran and Maan and Hindus and Muslims and passionate love and passionate
hatred and all loud noises —just me and Malati and Savita and the baby.

We’ll sit on the other side of the Ganga and go to sleep for a year or two.” (1333)

Lata is in Calcutta. Malati writes a letter to Lata about Kabir who is in Brahmpur. She informed her that: “After you left for Cal (Calcutta), K (Kabir) sent me a note and we met at the Blue Danube. He wanted me to get you to talk to him or write to him. He said all sorts of things about how much he cared for you, sleepless nights, restless wanderings, lovelorn longings, and the lot. He spoke very convincingly, and I felt quite sorry for him. But he must be rather practised at that sort of thing, because he was seeing another girl—at the Red Fox—on about the same day. ‘The time has come when Woman must be restored to the status she occupied in ancient India: we must combine the best of the past and the present, of the West and the East . . .’ ”

Here, however, is our ancient law-book, the Manusmiriti. Take a deep breath:

‘Day and night, women must be kept in dependence by the males of their families. In childhood, a woman must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband and in old age to her son; a woman must never be independent because she is innately as impure as falsehood. . . . The Lord created woman as one who is full of sensuality, wrath, dishonesty, malice and bad conduct.’ ” (1152)

Malati also quotes in the letter a Hadith (saying of Prophet Mohammed):

P.S. Amongst the inmates of Paradise women will form the minority, and amongst the inmates of Hell a majority. I thought I’d be even-handed, and give you a quotation from the Hadith as well. ‘Hit or myth’: that, in a nutshell, is the attitude to women in every religion.
On reading Malati’s letter, Lata becomes emotional and her heart is full of jealousy. The novelist describes her condition that: “Lata did not sleep well. She lay awake well. She lay awake for hours, racked with jealousy. (p.1153-54) It reveals the intensity of passionate love between Lata and Kabir. Malati is the only person who is aware of this reality.

The second man, who comes in Lata’s life, is a poet and writer, Amit Chatterjee from Calcutta, who is a gifted, intelligent, witty, but eccentric and materialistic and hence enters Lata’s life more a relative and a friend rather than as a suitor. Amit’s eccentricity serves as the balm for her. His intelligence, his concern, brings out a cheerful and carefree Lata to the fore. With the passage of time Lata’s innocence and simplicity charm Amit. It is interesting that Amit’s wooing comes in the form of a poem, which is full of logic, irony, passion and wit. It reminds of the metaphysical poets particularly Marvell.

MODEST PROPOSAL

“As you have asked for black and white,  
May I send these line to you  
In the tacit hope you might  
Take my type at least as true.

Let this distance disappear  
And our hearts approach from far  
Till we come to be as near  
As acrostically we are.” (1288)

Neither Amit’s passion nor his intelligence moved Lata’s heart and as such she finally rejects him. She feels that he is whole-heartedly devoted to his creative activities and he cannot bear the burden of life and shoulder the responsibilities of
a husband. Lata comes to conclusion that: "We are too like. His moods veer and oscillate as wildly as mine. Can you imagine the life of our poor children? And if his mind’s on a book I don’t know if he’ll have any time for me. Sensitive people are usually very insensitive—I should know." ( )

Lata rejects Amit Chatterjee. She thinks that: "And what would it be like to be married to such a man? . . . He was just Amit—to convert him into a husband was absurd—the thought of it made Lata smile and shake her head.” (1289)

Haresh is the third man to enter Lata’s life, selected after a good deal of research work done by Mrs Rupa Mehra. He is socially awkward but sincere, hard working, honest, outspoken, broadminded, egalitarian, a staunch supporter of the family traditions. She thought of Haresh he was: “generous, robust, optimistic, impatient and responsible. There he stood in Prahapore, as solid as a pair of Goodyear Welted Shoes, twinkling his eyes affectionately at her from the pages of his letter and telling her as well as he was lonely without her.” (1291) All these positive qualities outweigh the gushiness and loudness in his personality. Haresh is a symbol of hope for a new Indian, ambitious, pragmatic, anti-snobbish, and a representative of a new emerging capitalist class.

Lata decided to marry Haresh because of his unaffected ways and sincere concern for everybody. Haresh is not handsome but mysterious and stranger: "But there was something adventurous in losing herself entirely in a world that she did not know with a man whom she trusted and had begun to admire—and who cared for her so deeply and steadily. She thought of a paanless Haresh, smiling his open smile; she sat him down at a table so that she could not see his co-respondent shoes; She ruffled his hair a bit, and—well, he was quite attractive! She liked him.
perhaps, given time and luck, she could even learn to love him." (1292) Haresh has a sense of compromise, which seems to be the dominant trait of his personality. Lata selects Haresh because she knows that she has no future with Kabir and the sexual fulfilment less significance place in her scheme of things. It is Indian woman’s view in general that sex is one of the basic needs of human being for warmth and for the continuity of family in particular and human life in general. Therefore, for Lata also, sex is only a process-procreation of family in particular and Lata talks about a lifetime of sexual union sans excitement and passion. It appears as a matter of fact supression of instinct of sex and hence unnatural. She comments:

I won’t feel I’ll be making a fool of myself with him with regard to, well with regard to sex.(1289)

On a visit to Lucknow to her mother’s first cousin, Lata has a traumatic experience when her aunt’s husband, Mr Sahgal makes crude sexual advances to Lata at night. The middle-aged well-known Lucknow lawyer has cruelly victimised his own daughter Kiran, who does not speak about her violation, and has turned highly neurotic. He describes his wife as being “like Sita—the perfect wife”, but takes pleasure in showing off the photographs of his ‘wife and daughter. Lata narrowly misses being molested but she has not revealed it even to Malati. Later in life, her lecherous uncle becomes a recurrent figure in her nightmares. Lata does not tell to anyone about her sexual harassment because of ‘honor’ and also that sex is a taboo and sex is not discussed openly.

Mrs. Rupa Mehra once had talked with Lata. She gives a piece of advice to Lata that: “You must study hard, Lata, there are so few days left”—Mrs Rupa Mehra cautioned her daughter—‘or you will never have your Daddy’s academic
success. You should not let your wedding and other things distract you.' And with
that she put "Ideal Marriage", carefully wrapped in the bridal colours of red and
gold, into her hands. 'This book will teach you everything—about Men,' she said,
lowering her voice for some reason. 'Even our Sita and Savitri had to have these
experience.'" (1313) Therefore, there is no security that the passionless union will
continue and last throughout her lifetime. There is possibility that Haresh, a
wordly-wise man might arouse all that sexual passions within Lata. After reading
the Dutch author's sex manual Ideal Marriage she "was as much repelled as
fascinated by what he had to offer" (1313) Lata and Haresh's marriage won't turn
out to be happy and wholesome in spite of Haresh being the "the bronze casket"
(1299) as Malati so candidly points out to Lata.

Lata's attitude towards Kabir is rather more complex. It is a reality that even
after promising to marry Harish, she thinks of Kabir longingly, she is not sure that
she is doing the right thing in rejecting Kabir. Lata contemplates.

"Even now I almost feel it's
he who's left me—and I can not bear it."

(1332)

Beside her unwillingness to hurt her mother's feeling and strong attachment to her
family and familial restraints she is unable to comprehend fully the intense nature
of Kabir's passion of love. In reality, she does lack the heroic spirit to plunge into
adventurous and riskful life of passionate love for Kabir. David Myres says:

"It also tends to explain why Lata, in rejecting the
Liberation of sexual passion, chooses a bride groom who
is dedicated to the capitalist work ethic of higher
productivity to control and repress sexuality and to
harness it to the familial duty of reproduction. Lata's
decision is not one of free will; she has been brain
washed. Vikram Seth argues in favour of humour, self
discipline, martial ordered and the work etc. as bulwarks
against the chaos of passion and break down of civil
order and productivity."
But the significant question is can one repress the Libido and opt for sublimation and work ethic without starving the personality of spontaneity and vigour?  

In respect of love affair between Lata and Kabir, Murari Prasad rightly remarks that:

“At the moment that Lata and Kabir are meeting at the Blue Danube to part for life, the two attitudes to Love. The rationalist and the romantic are sharply in conflict.”

Lata is a normal, ordinary Indian girl, entrenched into age-old traditions and customs, superstitions with the virtues of patience, compromise, adjustment and even sacrifice. Lata for a long span of time is under phychological pressure that she is forced to supress her instinct of love for Kabir. In fact, Lata sacrifices her love on the altar of traditions and the customs of an ‘arranged marriage’!

During conversation with her mother (in presence of Savita), Lata says:

“I remembered Daddy used to tell us we should follow our heart.”

(1332)

Lata wanted to follow her heart in respect of her love affair with Kabir. It is a universal truth that most significant decisions in one’s life are taken by heart and not by mind. It is evident that Vikram Seth does not believe in Wisdom of Heart! That popular Urdu philosopher poet of East, Dr. Allama Mohammed Iqbal says:

Mind be a guide near the heart, it is a good,  
But sometimes heart should be left alone.

Lata’s rejection of Kabir is a sacrifice and her decision is based on familial constraints and social pressure that is prevailing in traditional and orthodox Indian Society.
It is rather surprising to point out that in both the marriages of sisters Savita and Lata, Vikram Seth has not presented two basic necessities. These two social realities are undeniable and inevitable in an Indian Hindu “arranged marriage”, the one is the horoscopes of the boy and girl to be married and other is “dowry” given by bride’s parents to bridegroom. It is an open secret that in every Indian marriage, the dowry is a must! Lata and Harish both belong to middle class Indian family. These social realities of the time are not explicitly presented in the novel!

The writer has presented other customs, traditions and rituals of an Indian marriage are portrayed in the novel. The other social feature of Indian wedding such as playing of the “Tabla”, “Shehnai”, women singing, wedding songs, some innocent, some risque and dancing to the beat of Dholak” (1338) all are presented “On the day of marriage the groom party was fifteen minutes late”, (p.1338) though the fixation of day, date and actual time of wedding at 8’O clock. The Bangal Ceremony, the Barat etc. all is mentioned.

The young local priest of Arya Samaj temple performed the marriage of Lata and Harish. The novelist describes the marriage ceremony. “He (priest) lit the fire and began the ceremony ... the priest went through the rites. Mrs. Mehra was sobbing through her Sanskrit and Savita was sobbing too and soon Lata was crying well. When her mother took her hand, filled with rose petals and pronounced the words, “O bridegroom, accept this well-adorned bride called Lata”, Harish prompted by the priest, took her hand firmly in his own and repeated the words: “I thank you, and accept her willingly.” (1338)

Everything went well. Her brothers puffed rice onto her hands and into the fire each time and Harish circled it. The knot between their scarves was done and
Sindoor was applied to the parting of Lata’s hair and he gave a gold ring to Lata. The ring ceremony puzzled the priest because it is not the part of Arya Samaj marriage rituals!

Kabir was not present at the wedding ceremony of Lata. The novelist portrays the condition of dejected Kabir. He describes: “Kabir had not been able to bring himself to come to the wedding. But though it was Thursday night, he had not gone to visit his mother either. ... The ceremonies will be over by now, he thought...He hailed a boatman, and took a boat down-river back to the university and his father’s house.” (1348) Seemita Mohanti rightly comments on the scene:

“The first thing that strikes the mind when one reads these lines is the tragic irony of Kabirs plight. This is the same place where his love had sparkeld and climaxed. This is also the same place from where his love life had taken a turn towards the worse, as Lata had been sighted walking hand in hand with Kabir, which had brought on all those tumultuous events that took place in their lives. Now sitting on the bank’s of Ganga, or walking on the sands, or taking a boat down river, all he is left with is a colossal sense of emptiness and nothingness the quiet silent monuments is symptomatic of that. One may say, the style of A Suitable Boy is integrated with its quick changing situations, both physical and mental, and ranges from funny, ludicrous, to impeccable social manners, to such situations where sorrow, remorse, desolation are sublimated into tragic grandeur.”

After the marriage there is a conversation between Lata’s best friend Malati and her mother:

‘SHE’S married the wrong man’,
said Malati to her mother. “And its breaking my heart.”

“Malati” said her mother,’ everyone must make their own mistakes. Why are you sure it is a mistake?’

‘It is, it is, I know it!’ said Malati passionately. ‘And she’ll
find out soon enough.’ She was determined to get Lata to at least write a letter to Kabir. Surely Haresh, with the simpering Simran in his shady background, would have to accept that as reasonable.” (1342)

Malati is very close to Lata and she fully understands the feelings of Lata and as such her observations are significant. Malati feels that Lata by marrying with Haresh has committed a mistake.

The morning after the wedding, Haresh suddenly decided over the breakfast that since he happened to be in Brahmpur, he should look in on the local Praha-factory… and then he went off and left Lata alone.

In an “arranged marriage” usually it happens in India that if a bridegroom is from a capitalist class he gives first preference to his business and even does not take bride on honeymoon trip. The novelist rightly points out that:

"Haresh could not take a honeymoon immediately because of the pressure of work, but he promised to take one soon." (1349)

Mahapatra and Nayak rightly analyses the novel and comment that:

“Each of the three love stories dramatized in A Suitable Boy ends tragically Lata loses Kabir and marries someone who had percieved her as ‘wife material’ (Seth 597)” .

David Myers critically examines the novel and points out that in reality it is a tragic novel he says:

There are number of interrelated tragic climaxes as one would expect from a novel with such a complex network of characters. There is Rasheed’s tragic suicide in the holy Ganges; there is Kabir’s bitter loneliness, also
on the bank’s of the same river; there is Lata’s secret terror that she has done the wrong thing in renouncing her distraught passion for Kabir, there is Maan’s and Mahesh Kapoor’s tragic experiences in the book can hardly be ignored. 10

The conclusion of the novel is very significant to understand the **Suitability** of a suitable boy which Lata selected and got married and help the reader to guess the future marital life of Lata. The novelist describes that: “And the next day Lata and Haresh were themselves seated in a train bound for Calcutta...Her mother came to see them off at the railway station, together with Savita and Pran...Lata waved from the window as the train pulled out of train Brahmpur Junction. Haresh appeared relaxed and happy, and that, she found, made her happy too...An hour or so later, during a halt at one of the smaller railway stations, she saw a small crowd of monkeys. They became aware of her looking out at them and, anticipating a sympathetic soul, approached her window.” (1349)

Lata saw Haresh sleeping in the compartment. What a strange fact that the husband travelling alone with his newly bride for the first time was sleeping! But Lata was awake and she was looking out of the window of the compartment. She saw large number of monkeys on the plateform and then she: “*Threw them a few biscuits: they gathered around, chattering and insistent. She looked for a moment or two at her hennaed hands, took out a musammi, peeled the thick green skin with care, and began to distribute the segments. The monkeys gobbled them down instantly. The whistle had blown when Lata noticed a rather old monkey, sitting alone almost at the end of the platform...He was contemplating her carefully and undemandingly...As the train began to move, Lata quickly reached down into the bag of fruit for another musammi, and threw it in his direction. He moved towards*
it, but the others, seeing it roll along, began running towards it too; and before she could see what had become of it, the train had steamed out of the station.” (1349)

The last scene of the novel is symbolic and pregnant with meaning. Lata’s father used to call her, his little monkey (592). The monkey is a symbol of Lata and “musammi” is symbol of her “youthful life”, the rather “old monkey sitting alone almost at the end of platform is symbol of Harish and other monkeys are symbols of Kabir, Amit etc. and the train is a symbol of journey of life.

Lata threw “musammi” in the direction of “old monkey” which rolls towards him but the other monkeys too began running towards it. Whether the old monkey got hold of “musammi” or not” it is not known. Lata is unable to see, who got hold of the musammi” because the train moved out of station!

Lata’s future life is unpredictable and not clearly visible like the future of her “musammi”. It is rather difficult to foresee the working of her future “marital life” It is not possible to foretell what Fate has in store for Lata! though in the end the novelist has given a clue but it is for the readers to arrive at the conclusion.

The writer seems to say that an “arranged marriage” brings a sense of affection, security, economic stability, understanding, adjustment and tolerance—the major requirements for a life-long successful marriage. The reasons put forward by the novelist are not convincing. The novelist gives preference to rational over passion. Like his first novel The Golden Gate, the present novel A Suitable Boy also unfolds a tragic love story and in the end the lovers are separated forever!
Vikram Seth fails to admit the reality that life of a couple in an arranged marriage life is rather dull, mechanical, boring, monotonous, deprived of real love, curiosity, eagerness, anxiety, ecstatic pleasure and fulfilment of natural instinct of love including sex and as such there is no “true marriage of two minds”!

There are postmodern elements in the contemporary literature and Fine Arts in a sense of merging and simultaneity of different cultures the in postmodern literature this cultural hybridity is highlighted. The present novel is set in various cultures and it highlights this aspect of postmodernity. There are many references to other works of literature, which enrich the world of the novel. It is said, “No text is without its inter-texts.” The postmodern element of inter-sexuality is in abundance in the novel.

There is obvious reference to William John Shakespeare. In a revealing passage, Lata overtly hints in a letter to Haresh Khanna writes:

“I don’t know if I’m myself is one of Shakespeare’s creatures.” (912)

The novel also refers to William Shakespeare’s romantic comedy **Twelfth Night**. There is intense and passionate love between Lata and Kabir. Lata comes to the consumation of her passion of love when as Olivia in William Shakespeare’s play **Twelfth Night**, she tells Kabir who is playing Malvolio, “Wilt thou go to bed, Malvolio”. The reference to **Twelfth Night** heightens the effect.

There is reference to James Joyce, who is a modern novelist but the critics consider his novels modern as well as postmodern. There is discussion in the novel that James Joyce should be included or not in the syllabus of English literature.
There is also reference to famous English novelist’s Thomas Hardy and Jane Austen’s “Mansfield Park” also finds place in this novel. Large numbers of critics have pointed out the similarity of the theme of matchmaking and marriage in both the novels.

The Imam (Head Priest) of the Alamgiri Mosque of Brahmpur Purva Pardesh in his sermon on Friday Prayer quotes Surah’s (verses) from the Holy Quran which are warning to idolaters. The novelist has quoted from Arberry’s translation of Quran, “which are more often provocative.” But the writer is successful in making the sermon of the Imam inflammatory. In reality Arabic word “Islam” means “Submission to the Will of Allah and Peace.

Malati in a letter to Lata writes a Hadith (Saying of Prophet Mohammed) it foretells about the future lives of Muslim women after death and the day of the judgement and not the Muslim women living in this world. Vikram Seth tells about the future world i.e. Hell and Heaven where all will live permanently. He does not point out the status, position and rights enjoyed by women in Islam and the prevailing conditions of women in a Muslim society in support of his argument.

There is reference to Bhagvad Gita in the novel. The writer talks of soothing Sanskrit and he further says it “endure fleeting things. They come and go.” And relate how “living”. The novelist is successful in pointing out that the Sanskrit word Dharma in reality can be defined as a combination of “justice”, “balance”, “duty” and “culture”.
In Indian mythology there is Trinity of gods, Brahma, god of creation, Vishnu god of protection and Shiva, god of destruction. There is dispute between Hindus and Muslims over the construction of Shiv Ling Temple, on a piece of land adjacent to Western Side of Mosque in Brahmpur.

Malati in a detailed letter to Lata mention about Manu, the Hindu law giver and his Treatise “Manusmriti” to point out the position and status of women in a Hindu family. It also points out the qualities of a woman.

There is also reference to a book of Hindu Black Magic entitled The Tantra of Owls which gives Sovereign Remedy to obtain employment and method of keeping a woman in man’s control.

Mrs. Rupa Mehra gives her daughter Lata a book by Dutch Sexologist Dr. Van de Velde. The book on the sex is entitled Ideal Marriage. It is an important sex manual, which gives methods of “Ideal Communion”. The novelist has not mentioned the world famous India’s book on sex and “Art of Love” by Vastayana’s Kama-Sutra.

There is description Ramayana, Ramleela and Dusshera victory procession as well as Moharram procession and even “the elegy on the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, the grandson of Prophet Mohammed”.

It also refers to 14th Century Indian Saint Kabir, (1398-1518) a metaphysical and mystic poet. He lived a very long life. Kabir was a son of a weaver born in a Muslim family but his followers were Hindus as well as Muslim
his poetry is full of Indian mysticism and Sufism. The hero of the novel is named Kabir and his name is symbolic. Kabir is a symbol of Hindu-Muslim Unity.

Large number of couplets and even “gazals” (Love poem—addressed to beloved) are quoted in full from the poetry of famous Urdu poets, the Shakespeare and the Keats of Urdu, Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1722-1810), Nawab Khan Dagh Dehlvi (1831-1905) and the first Urdu poet Shah Valiullah Vali Aurangabadi and Meer Baber Ali Anis. He has also quoted the Urdu couplets of local poet Mast from Brahmput. There is also reference to famous book The Poetical Works of Ghalib: An Album of pictures of Chughtai.

In India, before independence Urdu was the language of Hindu-Muslim unity and their composite culture. During India’s Freedom Movement against Britishers, Urdu was the language of “Inquilab” (Revolution). Hindus and Muslims had their education through Urdu Medium. Urdu was a language of common people. It is irony of fate that today there is not a single Urdu medium High School in Uttar Pradesh!

It is a reality that before independence more than 50% writers and poets of Urdu were Hindus. Urdu is a melodious, delicate and rich language of expression of human thought feelings and emotions. In the novel the characters like Mann, Saeeda and others express their feelings, emotions, passions and thoughts through Urdu couplets better than in real speech. The couplets heighten the effect and enable the reader to understand characters of the novel better. The famous and popular Hymn during the period of Freedom Movement “Uth, jaag, Musafir” is also given in the novel.
A famous and leading contemporary Indian English novelist, Khushwant Singh comments on the authenticity of the novel and he eulogised that:

"I lived through that period and I could not find a flaw---it is really an authentic picture of Nehru’s India.”

M.Gopalacharya and B. Krishnaiah say:

Vikram Seth is a spokesman of India’s cultural heritage and national identity... The post-modern writers of 1980’s and 1990’s including Vikram Seth attempt to portray the culture territory that includes variations of ethnicity, nation, gender, region and developing of a language representing the voice of the post-colonial... The writers of post-eighties primarily focus on the issues of troubled political, ideological issues of recent Indian history and try to retell their cultural domain by representing the history in a hybridised language, offering resistance and creating a voice to the subalterns and marginalised. Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children portrays infinite number of voices and contradictory accounts of history thereby undermining the master narratives, and provides an opportunity to the subalterns and marginals of history. History becomes the primary concern of the text. Rushdie liberates history through his magical realism which converts facts into fiction and fiction into facts. Therefore the postcolonial history of India and Pakistan is mediated through the protagonist Hybridization and Indigenization of the language in the text help to articulate the pathos, traumas and yearing of the postcolonial society. These characteristic impart Nativism to the post-modernist Indian novel.... Vikram Seth’s A Suitable Boy is a post-modernist novel of 1990’s, from the perspective of Nativism.”

A Suitable Boy (1993) is highly praised by the critics for its truthfulness which owes more to research than imagination. It is compared with grand novels of
19th Century writers, Leo Tolstoy’s (1828-1910) War and Peace and George Eliot’s (1819-1880) Middle March because of social realism and these novels are conceived on grand scale and in respect of theme of love and marriage it is compared with Jane Austen’s (1775-1817) novels. The novel is set in post-Independent India and it gives a slice of India’s 2 years history.

The novel can be compared with Salman Rushdie’s Midnight Children (1980) which is also set in India. The hero of the novel is born on the midnight of 15th August 1947, the time and the year of birth of new Indian Nation and it portrays the pictures of 25 year’s history of India including Bangla Desh Freedom War and imposition of Emergency in India in 1975. The central theme is also of existential dimension.

Both the novelists are postmodern but in case of narrative technique, Salman Rushdie employs Magic Realism and Vikram Seth uses the mode of Social Realism.
Chapter-IV
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