Chapter IV

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One of the most glaring defects of the Hindu society and one which was responsible for its divisive nature was the over-dependence on concepts like caste and untouchability. Though social reformers like Nanak, Kabir, Chaitanya, Ranade and Jyotiba Phule tried much to break the caste-barriers, their attempts did not do much harm to the fortresses of orthodoxy. And all efforts at social reform died out after a brief run of success.

However during the 1920s and 30s, the social and economic plight of the masses assumed a pan-Indian validity, as never before, because of certain socio-political compulsions. The caste divisions and consequent disarray in the Hindu society caused much concern to national leaders as the imperialistic forces tried to divide and rule not only on communal lines, but if possible, on caste lines as well.

At the Round Table Conference in London in 1931, Gandhiji opposed the segregation of the Untouchables into distinctive electoral groups as had been done in the case of religious minorities like the Muslims, Christians and the Sikhs. When, ultimately the Communal award was published on 17 August 1932, Gandhiji immediately saw through the game of the British and wrote to Ramsay MacDonald, the British Prime
Minister that "he proposed to undertake a perpetual fast unto death" "till the government withdrew their scheme of communal (separate) electorates for the depressed classes" (Nanda 20). And when Gandhiji undertook the fast on 20 Sept. 1932, it shook the whole nation. B.R. Nanda, Gandhiji's biographer, describes the momentous incident thus:

... 20 September 1932, when the fast began, was observed in the country as a day of fasting and prayer. At Santiniketan, the poet Rabindranath Tagore, dressed in black, spoke to a large gathering on the significance of the fast, and the urgency of fighting an age-old evil. There was a spontaneous upsurge of feelings: temples, wells and public places were thrown open to the Untouchables. (21-22)

After the successful completion of the fast, Gandhiji himself undertook a nation-wide tour to collect money for the Harijan Welfare fund. But a centuries' old social tyranny like casteism cannot be uprooted in a few months, and Rajaji's prediction that the revolution was over and that what remained was but the removal of the debris, may appear rather too optimistic given the present-day realities.

Nevertheless the remarkable campaign initiated by Gandhiji and its repercussions, felt throughout the length and breadth of the nation, offered a fertile field of fictional material to the creative writers in India. Progressive realists like Mulk Raj Anand and K.A. Abbas in English, Sarath Chandra Chatterjee in Bengali, Premchand in
Hindi and Thakazhi in Malayalam turned their attention to the plight of the depressed classes of society. In Madras Presidency too, writers like Venkataramani and Nagarajan showed a deep interest in such social problems created by the moribund attitudes of the Hindu orthodoxy. They were also concerned about the steady rise of anti-Brahmin sentiments in the Madras Presidency.

Thus social movements for the emancipation of the Untouchables, and the anti-Brahmin movement led by the Justice Party aimed at bringing down the dominance of Brahmins, find their echo in the novels of Indian English novelists like Venkataramani and Nagarajan. Both these novelists are concerned with the social repercussions and far-reaching implications of these movements. They are not also unaware of the calculations of self-interested politicians in pursuing interests that are not altruistic. In their novels and short stories they deal with the issue comprehensively.

The problems of the Untouchables, who lived for generations at the very fringe of Hindu society captivate the immediate attention of Venkataramani in Kandan. However, in Murugan, Venkataramani gives more prominence to the emerging intermediary castes and the difficulties they encounter in their search for political power. In Paper Boats too, Venkataramani gives us some sketches of the outcastes but here their lot is treated more in a romantic mode than in a realistic one.
In Venkataramani's *Kandan*, as it is already mentioned, the focus of attention is on the plight of the Untouchables and their addiction to the intoxicating drinks. The inhuman conditions in which they subsist and their futile attempts to drown their sorrows in toddy, capture the consistent attention of the novelist. The toddy-shop at Akkur, where the novel opens, is always a presence in the novel much like the coal mines in D.H.Lawrence's novels. "The peasants and farm labourers who assemble at the wine-seller's shop for squandering their hard-earned money and burying their anxieties of life over a cup of toddy, act as a chorus in the novel" as Raizada points out (106).

In the earlier novel, *Murugan* the focal point is the river-ghat at Cauveri where the women of Alavanti gossip and where all the major incidents in the novel are discussed. But in *Kandan* the river-ghat is replaced by the toddy-shop as the hub of village life. Again, as in the river-ghat, perfect democratic traditions operate. Though the Harijans and the 'Padayachis', an intermediary caste one step above the Untouchables in caste hierarchy, move in separate groups there is an easy-going relationship between them prompted by their common affinity to the strong brew. "Communal drinking", as Daiches points out, "is one of the most primal gestures of community...making contact with each other through social gestures of conviviality...." (9).

The toddy-shop at Akkur shows us the miseries of
village life at its worst. Though Venkataramani is an ardent admirer of the simple village life, in his depiction of the scenes in the toddy-shop he appears as a brutal realist. Nandan, Mookkan and Katteri of the 'Pariah cherri' ruminate here on the fate of the Untouchables. Katteri tells them in the vein of a philosopher: "A pot of toddy is the only friend the 'pariah' has all the world over" (Kandan 8). The rural poverty, the insensibility of the landlord, the cruelty of the 'Padayachis' all go together to make the life of the Untouchable a living hell. It is easy to sense the rebellion brewing in their hearts. Karuppan says "... it's better to starve and die than to work in this wretched 'Pannai' where the cattle are better housed and fed than men" (Kandan 10).

Later, not even the presence of Kandan, the apostle of non-violence deters them from launching an agrarian uprising. They loot the garden house of Mudaliar. Thus we see how long years of injustice and poverty drive even the innocent villagers into callous acts of brutality. These Untouchables, in the hour of loot also remember the cause of their sorrow — the toddy-shop — and set fire to it. Venkataramani shows the burning down of the toddy-shop as a turning point in the life of the Untouchables. With its destruction, the Untouchables become freedom fighters. Having liberated themselves from the tyranny of the liquor, they try to liberate the motherland from the foreigners.
In *Murugan* also the adverse effect of liquor on the life of the Untouchable is mentioned, though indirectly. Murugan, blames himself for opening a toddy-shop which led to his fall and ruin. "The toddy shop has been our ruin...", he tells his wife (215). In the jail itself, Murugan sees his punishment as divine justice for ruining many families through the alcohol: "But did we not in three years starve the poor, rob the children of their food by vending drink to their fathers, stir up indirectly riots in the village between the tiller and the landholder" (216). Thus Venkataramani sees addiction to liquor as a great curse in the life of the poor Untouchables; a thing which starves their children and brews rebellion in their brains.

The picture Venkataramani presents in his two novels—*Kandan* and *Murugan*—is radically different from the one he presents in *Paper Boats*. Here, in a sketch entitled "My Little Arunalam", Venkataramani glorifies the life of the Untouchables who are seen as noble savages living in close communion with the elements. Even his lack of literacy is seen as a romantic and mythical trait in his nature. "The schools and colleges are no more for him than they are for the ocean that rolls in tidal waves, the wind that blows whenever it listeth, the stars that twinkle because of innate iridescence" (61). Venkataramani forgets the fact that such "positive gains" of illiteracy will only keep the Untouchable in a state of eternal destitution.
Arunalam is further mythicized as Venkataramani compares him to Ishwara, "the Lord of Creative Energy' and to the great 'avatars'. It is obvious that this highly romantic picture of the 'pariah' boy hardly justifies the realities of life and Venkataramani's scant regard for such realities makes the sketch a purely literary exercise.

The same supreme unconcern for realism is seen again in yet another sketch "On Fishermen" in Paper Boats. Here the picture presented is that of a 'Sembadavan'. The life of the 'Sembadavan' is vested with the same halo which was provided earlier to the 'pariah' boy. "On the whole my fishermen seem to be a highly poetic people... The boundless ocean, representing the limitless, the unchartered life, is the element on which they live" (Paper 33). Even his naivety is a source of admiration for the writer. "He is the silliest fellow in the world - yes, sillier than the fish he himself baits" (Paper 27).

It will be worthwhile to see what prompted the author to indulge in such patently false picturisation of a group of people whose life had always been a synonym for penury and destitution. The answer to this lies in Venkataramani's aim in writing these sketches. In the preface to Paper Boats, Venkataramani recollects how he had sent the reprint of "The Hindu Temple" to A.C.Benson and how the latter wrote back thus: "I cannot help feeling that a number of similar sketches on Indian Life and Customs would be of great service to us here in England "(Vii-Viii). And this letter kindled
his interest in writing and launching his *Paper Boats* with a hope of reaching "distant ports" (Viii). "The cargo is mine", he concludes, "... but the difficult navigation is theirs..."(ix). Thus the preface makes the aim of writing sketches very clear.

With this aim in his mind, of making the English readers relish vignettes of Indian life, Venkataramani could not afford to take them to the mud and decades-old mire of Hindu social life accumulated in the 'Palla' and 'Pariah' 'cherris.' He gives them the rosy picture of the noble savage; a picture the Victorian gentleman can read with complacency, without vexing himself much on the fate of humanity elsewhere. As T.S.Eliot has written, human beings cannot withstand too much reality. But for the discerning critic, Venkataramani's idealism is too easy-going and facile to merit any critical attention. In *Murugan*, *Kandan* and in *Jatadharan and Other Stories* the presentation is couched in no idealistic garb. Obviously, these books were written for an exclusively Indian audience as their themes acknowledged and hence the author hesitates not a moment to present a true-to-life picture.

Unlike Venkataramani, Nagarajan does not give us any detailed account of the life of the Untouchables. In the *Chronicles*, inspired by Gandhiji's campaign against untouchability a few Gandhians go to the 'Cheri' and do some social work. Apart from this, there is very little mention of
the plight of the Untouchables. In Athawar House they are not at all in the picture. In Cold Rice, none of the twelve stories has for its subject the life of the Untouchables. In Chidambaram the temple-entry of Nandan, the Untouchable is dramatically presented. But then Chidambaram is a chronicle play; more like a fantasy than like a realistic picture of the decade. Nandan's entry into Chidambaram temple assisted by Govinda Dikshit and his union with Lord Nataraja through entering the sacrificial fire form an episode in the play which otherwise has very little to do with the more explosive form of temple-entry that one witnesses in Chronicles.

The plight of the Harijans assumes some importance when Congress politics becomes lively in Kedaram with the approaching elections. The elections are seen as a trial of strength between the Congress and the Justice Party which stridently advocates anti-Brahmin sentiments. The Congress politicians need the support of the Harijans to keep the Justice Party in check and Vanchinatha Sastri wants to make Kedaram a model centre for social welfare work. "That would please Gandhiji and also make for the success of Congress in the coming elections" (Chronicles 225). And the Harijans, on their part, reciprocate the good work done by the high caste politicians by voting for the Congress party. Thus we see that the motives behind the Harijan uplift launched by the politicians of Kedaram are not altruistic.

But people other than politicians also are interested in uplifting the Harijans and some of them like Nirmala and
Vasu do the work with sincerity. Nirmala, especially, puts her soul and body into the Harijan upliftment and some of her comments on her work reminds us of Gandhiji himself. She says to Koni: "We have only been playing at harijan uplift. Providing a school or organising a scout-troop are just salves. The disease has gone far deeper than that", and she suggests the remedy also: "Become a harijan yourself." (Chronicles 227). Though Koni thinks the last suggestion impractical, Nirmala as a true Gandhian was echoing the words of Gandhiji only. Gandhiji used to say that all must become 'sudras'. In the meeting of the Minorities Committee on 13 November 1931, Gandhiji spoke thus: "I claim myself in my own person to represent the vast masses of Untouchables." (Nanda 20).

Inspired by Nirmala's enthusiasm, other people like Koni also visit the 'cheri' and do social work among the Harijans. It is noteworthy that neither Nirmala nor Vasu likes the plan of the Congress to ban the sale of liquor. In this, Vasu echoes the views of Venkataramani expressed through Katteri in Kandan. "That [law on prohibition] would be cruel, Pharisaical. Drink has been the only solace and comfort of this unfortunate people. After a hard day's work, these men need something to stimulate and sustain them. What we should aim at is to train them to be temperate" (Chronicles 228-229). And when the Congress Government enforces total Prohibition Vasu opposes it. "A temperance drive, I can understand, but out-and-out prohibition is intolerable. It is the Sir Philip
Sidney story in reverse..." (Chronicles 237). But Vasu's and Cole's opposition are useless as the Congress Government moves "like a Juggernaut car" (Chronicles 237). However Cole's prophecy that 'prohibition was the policy of a madman' (Chronicles 237) was vindicated by the events in the last thirty or forty years.

Thus both Venkataramani and Nagarajan though aware of the evils of drink and drugs and the destructive role they play in the lives of the Untouchables are against total prohibition. They believe that the habit of a lifetime cannot be abandoned in a single day, and being aware of the frailities of the human mind, advocate a moderate policy of temperance than abstinence. Their aim is to wean away the younger generation at least from the drink and direct their energies in pursuit of better goals.

Yet another landmark in the Harijian's tortuous struggle for social recognition and acceptance into the wider fabric of Hindu society is the movement for temple-entry. Hindu temples are the centres of Hindu culture and an entry into them has a symbolic significance as well. Many Brahmins and also non-Brahmins were against the idea of permitting Harijans inside the temple.

The movement for temple-entry is described in detail by Nagarajan in his Chronicles. He also deals with the same issue in yet another form in his play Chidambaram, to which mention has already been made. But this issue does not find
any mention in any of the novels or short stories of Venkataramani.

In Chronicles the issue of temple-entry creates very strong sentiments. This is something to be expected as no other issue has shaken the orthodoxy so much. Even the 'Thengalai-Vadagalai' controversy had only the value of a comic interlude compared to the movement for temple-entry launched by the Congress Party. Koni mentions the problem thus, and his unusually strong language betrays his anxieties: "Congress was trying to set the Nilaveni, the Cauveri, and all the South Indian rivers on fire. They were proposing to throw all Hindu temples open to Harijans. Hindu society was rocked to its foundations" (240).

Already the temples of Travancore were opened to the Untouchables. Koni is hoping against hope that the British will not follow that example, incidentally set by a Brahmin Dewan. Says Koni: "I mentally apostrophied the Dewan of that state, a first rate lawyer, steeped in Hindu Culture, and wailed, "You too, Brutus!" (241). His arguments against the temple-entry finds no sympathetic ear even with his close friend Vasu who chastises him, "Do you think, Koni, that the Heavens will fall? ". And again he asks, "Are they [Harijans] worse than the sacred bulls and cows that wander unmolested into the temple precincts?" (241).

Against such arguments Koni is tongue-tied and Vasu gives him yet another smashing reply. Quoting a friend of
him, he tells that the "degrading social customs are not the result of our religion" but "are the consequences of our irreligion" (241). Koni is powerless against such arguments and he cannot do anything but to sulk and make himself unhappy. "I saw the India of my forefathers crumbling away before my eyes...I resigned myself to it. What cannot be cured must be endured. Man was helpless in the face of the excesses of the fanatics in politics" (242).

And Koni gives us a picture of the actual temple-entry by the Harijans in Kedaram. The Harijans led by Vanchinatha Sastri "walked round the outer enclosure, prostrated themselves on the ground in the direction of the 'sanctum sanctorum' of Kedareswar" (244). A large number of Brahmins and non-Brahmins gather and jeer at Vanchi. Their remarks are offensive but as Koni says, "the Harijans showed more understanding" (244). Vanchi tells Koni "Whatever could I do, Koni?. Congress' instructions were clear" (244).

Thus Nagarajan gives us a wide spectrum of divergent views on the issue of temple-entry. There is the orthodox view of Koni which is opposed to anything that goes against the age-old traditions; then there is the unorthodox views of Vasu for whom intellectual slum-clearance is a sacred obligation; and then there is the opportunism of Vanchinatha Sastri for whom everything is a matter of convenience rather than principle. Thus Nagarajan gives us a comprehensive view of the issues involved in one of the greatest social
movements of the decade.

From the Untouchables when we turn our attention to a higher caste in the hierarchy -- the non-Brahmins, a conglomeration of various castes -- we learn that both novelists see great potential in their emergence. Both Venkataramani and Nagarajan see them as the future leaders of the Hindu society; with Brahminism on the decline and Untouchables still steeped in the darkness of past negligence. They also see it clearly that in a democratic scheme of things, non-Brahmins are bound to dominate, given the very fact of their superior numerical strength. Both of them point out the gradual shifting of power from the Brahmins to the non-Brahmins in their different modes -- Venkataramani subtly and Nagarajan more openly.

In Venkataramani's Murugan and Kandan both Murugan and Kandan are non-Brahmins. In making these non-Brahmins the main characters of his novels, Venkataramani was setting a new trend as, hitherto, most of the heroes in Madhaviah's novels or that of Rajam Iyer were mostly Brahmins by caste. It must be remembered that Murugan is not the hero of the novel, but by giving his name to the novel Venkataramani is perhaps subtly indicating the shifting power structure in the Tamil country. In the novel itself the Brahmin land-owner, Ramu goes as a camp clerk to the English Collector and ultimately sells all his lands to another Brahmin, Periaswami Iyer. But he gives his coconut garden to Murugan. Ramu sees a hidden justice in his action: "By a far superior right, this garden
Thus Ramu gives the coconut garden to Murugan, an act which underlines the shifting of economic power from the Brahmin, to the non-Brahmins. The symbolic significance of this act is not lost on the people of Alavanti as the women, much like a chorus, comment on the significance of this action. "Lucky days for 'Pallees' and 'Padayachis' and bad ones for Brahmins" (121). Later on, the same theme is repeated when the old lady comments after hearing Periaswami Iyer's downfall through litigation: "The time has come for you and me to ask our husbands to sell our little even to some 'Pallee' or 'Padayachee' and go to town" (200). Thus when land, which is traditionally associated with power, changes hands, it inevitably affects the hierarchy of power too. Hence in the next novel of Venkatramani, we see political leadership itself going to the hands of the non-Brahmin hero, Kandan.

The sub-title of Kandan is "A Novel of New India in The Making". This is significant in a way. It implies that in Venkatramani's "New India" the leadership itself is in the hands of non-Brahmins. The two most powerful characters, both antagonists for the major part of the novel -- Kandan and Chockalinga Mudaliar -- are non-Brahmins. All the major incidents of the novel are directly connected to at least one of them. Kandan acts as a great moral force over all the
other characters including the Brahmin characters like Rangaswamy I.C.S., Rajeswari Bai and Saraswati. But the influence of Mudaliar is more on the materialistic plane. Though in the beginning of the novel, Mudaliar is presented as a retrogressive force, towards the end he transforms himself completely and becomes a freedom fighter. An attack on Mudaliar by the Malabar police enrages the Tranquebar crowd and they clash with the police who fire into the crowd resulting in the death of Kandan. Thus, all the significant events in the novel are related to these two non-Brahmin characters.

Yet another significant aspect we have to take note of in Venkataramani's treatment of the theme is that there is no deliberate condescension as was seen in the issue of the Untouchables. The outcastes, be it Arunalam or a 'Sembadavan' or be it the Untouchables that come regularly to the toddy-shop at Akkur are treated with a spirit of condescension by the novelist. With all the politics directed towards their 'upliftment' this spirit of condescension was perhaps unavoidable. On the other hand, non-Brahmins are treated on an even plank by the Brahmin characters in the novel. In Murugan Brahmins are jealous of the emerging backward castes. Similarly, in Kandan Brahmins like Sundaram are dazzled by the wealth of Mudaliar.

The rise of the non-Brahmin movement is dealt with on a political scale in Nagarajan Chronicles whereas Venkataramani has dealt with the problem on an economic level in Murugan.
In *Chronicles* the shift in power takes place not because of economic aspects such as changing of land-ownership but because of purely political happenings like Municipal elections. In the field of politics, the non-Brahmins with their superior numerical strength are able to exert more influence and the Justice Party with its anti-Brahmin plank holds sway over them for sometime till the congress wins them over by playing the same game of dangling baits of power. The whole course of the movement is dealt with in detail by Nagarajan in *Chronicles*.

Anti-Brahmin sentiments find their echo in Kedaram for the first time during the Municipal elections. Meghanath Mandoor, one of the candidates, starts stressing the issue as his opposing candidate is a Brahmin — Vanchinatha Sastri. Mandoor points out that there are thirty councillors and twenty of them are Brahmins. Such casteism irks Koni, though elderly people like P.P.T. Chari advises him to take a lenient view of the whole problem: "We have had a long innings, my lad, time that the non-Brahmins had a look in" (73).

Ultimately, Mandoor's propaganda on caste-basis pays dividend. He wins the elections. The rise of such blatant anti-Brahminism upsets Koni very much, as he is incapable of taking a tolerant view on such matters. But many other Brahmins of Kedaram consider this rise of anti-Brahminism as a passing phase. Gangadhar Suri, the voice of good sense in
the novel, takes a very broad view of the problem. He tells Koni that things are "rapidly changing in India and the old mould of society" is "bound to receive a few smart shocks and that a certain amount of disintegration" is inevitable. (89). He also observes that the Brahmins have become "too complacent" and "too smug" and "needed some shaking" (89). Such a historical perspective of the problem, rises it to a genuine social issue and coming as it does from Gangadhar Suri, these observations merit a deeper analysis, which is done elsewhere in this chapter.

However, in the Madras Legislative Council elections, there is a rapprochement between Brahmins and non-Brahmins but this rapprochement is short-lived, as usually they are. Justice Party organises a mammoth conference at Kedaram and speaker after speaker hit at the Brahmins making Koni unhappy at the sudden turn of things. Koni loses his balance. Justice Party has the tacit backing of the Government and for some time the Congress leaders are despondent. But even in that gloomy situation, people like Gangadhar Suri keeps their equanimity. He tells Koni that the germs of communal hatred will die out soon. In order to outwit the Justice Party, the resourceful Congress politicians draw out a plan to bring Gandhiji himself to Kedaram. This idea seems impossible but the persistence of Vanchinatha Sastry pays and Gandhiji himself comes to Kedaram. Against the mass appeal of Gandhiji, Justice Party has nothing to offer and Congress wins the elections handsomely.
Nagarajan treats the entire episode on a purely political level ignoring the other deep-rooted causes of anti-Brahmin sentiments. Sociologists like Suntharalingam, in *Politics and Nationalist Awakening in South India*, and Indhu Rajagopal, in *The Tyranny of Caste*, have pointed out various reasons for the rise of anti-Brahmin sentiments in the Presidency. The dominance of Brahmins in the field of education and government jobs and the creation of a non-Brahmin and Dravidian consciousness as opposed to a Brahmin and Aryan consciousness were major contributory factors in the rise of anti-Brahmin sentiments. Along with this was the aspiration of the Brahmins to become, in T.S. Eliot's phrase, a "governing elite", from a "cultural elite" (qtd. in Narasimhiah, *Raja Rao's 259*). This aspiration found bitter opposition from the numerically superior non-Brahmins. However, these reasons are not given much emphasis by Nagarajan.

Caste conflicts in the early decades of the present century were not confined to the Brahmin and non-Brahmin castes alone. Along with each castes' aspirations to attain dominance over the other, other forms of caste tensions also used to surface time and again. Among the Brahmins we can observe a running feud between the 'Vadagalai' and 'Thengalai' sects -- sometimes over ludicrous trifles. And among the non-Brahmins themselves, while on the one hand they were fighting against the Brahmins for dominance, on the other hand, they were very much prone to fight among
themselves over apparent trifles.

Neither the non-Brahmins nor even the Untouchables were homogeneous in any sense. Among the non-Brahmins various castes and sub-castes were in existence and even among the Untouchables there was no dearth of sub-castes. The inter-caste tensions between the non-Brahmins form the background in one of the short stories of Nagarajan entitled "The Hosts of Tuscany" in Cold Rice. Like all other caste tensions in Nagarajan's novels, this particular conflict also proceeds from a trivial incident magnified out of proportion. The rivalry between two youths belonging to the Valaya and Vallamba castes almost erupts into a full scale war. The bloody turmoil is, however, prevented in time by the police constable. This short story deals with Nagarajan's favourite theory that all caste conflicts erupt from petty jealousies of individuals.

The situation of the Brahmins evoke elaborate treatment by both Venkataramani and Nagarajan. This is in no way surprising as both writers were Brahmins, and as Brahmins, they were fully aware of the life in the 'agraharam'. They give almost complete pictures of the life of the Brahmins and their steady decline, that started in the beginning of the present century. The fall of the Brahmins is a favourite theme with these two as it is with Raja Rao. But the difference in their treatment is that Venkataramani sees economic reasons for this fall, whereas Nagarajan views it as
a result of the political process. However, both have very little sympathy for the type of Brahmins who had deviated from their ancient ascetic life and plunged into materialism, thus inviting ruin on themselves.

Venkataramani especially, is a bitter critic of present-day Brahmins as can be seen from his collection of essays, *The Next Rung*. Here, he condemns the Brahmins, who instead of keeping alive the sacred fire they got from the Rishis of ancient India, have "turned into cooks and clerks, traders and stenographers, judges and ministers, purse-proud and foolish, in the busy and discordant walks of life in the city" (70).

Among the many characters that appear in Venkataramani's novels and short stories, only three Brahmin characters are presented in any sympathetic light and, incidentally, all the three are ascetics or almost so. They are Ramu in *Murugan*, Jatadharan and Muthu in *Jatadharan*. Apart from these three, there are many other Brahmin characters — Kedari and Markandam Iyer in *Murugan*, Rangan, Sundaram in *Kandan* and Subramaniam in *Jatadharan*, to cite a few examples. But none of these characters are pictured in any sympathetic way.

In *Murugan* Ramu follows the true tradition of the Brahmins. He is the 'learned-one' acting as a philosopher and guide to the less fortunate fellow human beings. His magnetic spirituality redeems several lost souls. Every
other character looks at him as a superior Being. Thus through this character Venkataramani tells us that the true Brahmin is respected by all others though such people have become very rare in the modern world.

Similarly Jatadharan, in the short stories "Jatadharan" and "Jatadharan's Marriage" is presented as an ideal character following the age-old vocation of the 'Guru', a vocation well-suited for the learned Brahmins. He too lives like true ascetics. Muthu of the story "Destiny" becomes a freedom fighter and social reformer. He too lives the life of a sanyasi. Thus we can see that all these Brahmins are truly ascetic in nature and the world holds them in high esteem. They are real Brahmins dedicated to a life of learning and public service. When Brahmins erred from this higher ideal, their downfall was swift.

The other Brahmin characters presented by Venkataramani are various manifestations of the Bhatta of Kanthapura. Kedari and Markandam Iyer in Murugan are both opportunists and lawyers, noted for their lack of scruples. Kedari makes ingratitude itself a great philosophy: "To be ungrateful is so natural that your whole being asks for it, strives to forget kindness received" (166). His life is vain and showy and in the end nemesis catches up with him. Markandam Iyer is just a grown-up version of Kedari. Both breed on each other; as evil usually does, and both plot each other's ruin. Their moral depravity and craving for temporal power show how deep a pit into which the Brahmins have fallen. The same is
true of Rangan and Sundaram of Kandan. Rangan quibbles and
prevaricates to Rajeswari Bai, whom he wishes to marry, about
his future plans to fight for his mother land while remaining
in Government service, enjoying its perks. Rangan hesitates;
the I.C.S. has captured his imagination. Temporal power is
too much a temptation to resist but finally his love for
Rajeswari Bai makes him follow her path. Kandan's magical
touch cures him of the remnants of selfishness and he too
becomes a dedicated nationalist. In the Rangan-Kandan
relationship we can see the traditional role of the castes
reversed. The Brahmin has become a prey to the temptations
of power and it has become the duty of the non-Brahmin to
correct him and lead him back to the path of righteousness.

But by far, the portrayal of Rangan is more sympathetic
than that of Sundaram, the railway station master at Akkur.
Sundaram deserves only our pity. Brahminness is only an
accident of birth in his case. Otherwise he has none of the
merits, either of piety or of scholarship or of innate
wisdom, that one commonly associates with this elite section
of the Hindu society. Being a Brahmin has become merely an
ascriptive virtue, and as such does not deserve the highest
position in the hierarchy. Apart from a hen-pecked husband,
Sundaram is a truant and a slave to his hunger. When he does
his 'Sandhya', he does it with the thought of polished rice
and 'sambar'—"with great speed letting much water between
his fingers"(Kandan 75). Instead of reading the 'Vedas' and
'Upanishads' like a true Brahmin, Sundaram reads only the

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pulp-fiction available in the Higginbothams' railway book-stall. Moreover, Sundarm is a coward too and on the fateful day of the Tranquebar riots he escapes both the bullet and the prosecution.

However, the sharpest comment on the Brahmins and on the rich idle folk of Tanjore comes from Sundaram himself. "I've trampled from Rameshwar to Peshawar", he tells his wife, "and nowhere the idle rich are so selfish, callous and low as herein our own Tamil Land. Polished rice has cut at the root of all our manly virtues and tamarind has soured us for ages and completed the ruin" (Kandan 80). It is true that the same tamarind has soured Sundaram also.

Surprisingly, the same sentiment is expressed by Mr. Cadell, the English Collector also, in Murugan. Mr. Cadell appoints Ramu as his camp clerk and tells him "I had three dozen applications from graduates but I selected you as I don't want scheming men of brains about me, for whom your district [Tanjore] is justly famous" (Murugan 84). Thus the Tamil country, and Tanjore in particular, is a land of scheming and selfish men is a theory repeated twice in Venkataramani's novels. Whatever be the truth of such sentiments, it shows the author's strong views on the 'unbrahminical' ways of the Brahmin caste, which has resulted in their decline. When the Brahmin becomes a power-monger like Kedari or an avaricious, unscrupulous fellow like Markandam Iyer or a truant like Sundaram or a sub-inspector of the excise department like Subramainam in "The Bride
Waits", whose vocation makes him "dilate his nostrils with the
daily sour odour of toddy" instead of "the smoke of ghee burnt
with the sacred arasam twigs" (Jatadharan 113); he cannot
command respect or superiority over the other castes. Such
Brahmins are no better than Bhatta of Kanthapura.

Nagarajan also is not very different from Venkataramani
in portraying the fall of the Brahmins. Though his novels
are peopled with many Brahmin characters, only a few deserves
our approbation; the majority of them are Brahmins only in
name. In Athawar House Gopinath Punt and Chudamani
Anantharama Aiyar and the young Venkatramani are presented as
desirable types whereas in Chronicles only Gangadhar Suri and
Koni's parents live like 'Vedic' Brahmins. In the same novel,
we get some of the worst specimens of Brahmins and with such
people around, it is no wonder that there is a rapid rising
of anti-Brahminism in Kedaram. In 'Cold Rice' and in the
one-act plays also we see many Brahmins, whose nature is
'unbrahminical' most often.

But anti-Brahmin sentiments come in for elaborate
treatment only in Chronicles. Therefore the reasons for such
sentiments need a close look. When Brahmins like Vanchinatha
Sastri, who are adept hands at manipulative politics, begin
to dominate Kedaram politics, non-Brahmins begin to resent it
and anti-Brahmin sentiments originate. Vanchinatha Sastri
can go to any extent to achieve his aim. Hemadri speaks to
Koni about Vanchi's nature thus: "If he had a daughter who
was a slut, he would not have scrupled to take advantage of her sluttishness to gain his point" (79). The worst aspect of Vanchi's character is his immorality. Almost every character in the novel alludes derisively to his sexual promiscuity. When such an immoral man is at the helm of Congress affairs in Kedaram it is no wonder that some of the non-Brahmins, even men like Hemadri, who had always been a supporter of Congress, look towards the Justice Party for enlightenment.

In 'Cold Rice' too Nagarajan presents yet another unscrupulous Brahmin -- Mahadeva Sastri of the 'Astrologer'. But the picture here is more of a caricature than a real one. Sastri's second wife had described him "a stone belly-god" (Cold 107). After the death of his third wife, this corpulent Brahmin plans to marry a sixteen year old girl but a clever astrologer forestals the unbecoming alliance. Evident in the whole story is the author's contempt for the lazy life the wealthy Brahmin lives and the avarice of other Brahmins to get him as a son-in-law.

It is obvious from these examples that both novelists display scant sympathy to the 'unbrahminical' Brahmins whom none can respect, either for their scholarship or for their personal integrity. Most of them are either "walking jests", a phrase used by Hemadri to describe Vanchi in Chronicles (234), or 'sitting jests' like Mahadeva Sastri in the "Astrologer". The ideal Vedic Brahmin devoted to a life of learning and prayer is an endangered species in the fictional
works of both novelists. Thus writers like Venkataramani, Nagarajan and Raja Rao, though Brahmins themselves, are the worst critics of Brahminism. Theirs is a case of 'treason to one's class' (Wellek and Warren 96). The same critics remind us that the "social origins of a writer play only a minor part in the questions raised by his social status, allegiance, and ideology", because "writers, it is clear, have often put themselves at the service of another class" (97).

Nagarajan, apart from giving an unflattering picture of Brahmins as individuals, goes one step further and picturises the fissiparous tendencies among them, originating from their disposition to tie themselves up in endless metaphysical abstractions. Such losing in the jungle of abstractions are the result of the "petrification of the mind and life in the relics of the forms which a great intellectual past had created" (Aurobindo 17). Accordingly, what external form of worship pleases the deity assumes paramount importance, eclipsing other virtues like piety and humility, which, the sacred books insist, are dearer to Gods than any form of worship.

This, then, is the background of a wholly irrelevant and unbecoming dispute between the two Aiyangar sects in Chronicles. Nagarajan himself gives an elaborate description of the background of the dispute in the travelogue.
Cauveri. Thus the dispute originated from "little more than matters of ritual". Nagarajan's treatment of the theme in Chronicles has all the elements of a farce. Koni tells us about the dispute: "When they [the Aiyangars] were not fighting they were in a state of armed neutrality" (43). Then in 1929, Koni tells us, that "the battle-drum began to throb. Aiyangar met Aiyangar, and there were excited comings and goings, hectic consultations between lawyers...and a first class row ensued" (43). Koni has no inkling as to the immediate cause but says that he has a suspicion that "its ultimate origin was in a mud-slinging match between Raghavaswami's daughter and Varadachari's wife" (43).

In Kedaram, the dispute between the two sects is about the right to sing sacred hymns at the temple. Had the 'Thengalais' the exclusive right or could the 'Vadagalais' also sing them? The dispute goes to the police. The police played as long as they could and it suited them, "like a kitten with a ball of fluff and at a latish stage, professed to have discovered that it was an unalloyed civil dispute, dropped the ball like a burning cinder, scuttled and ran" (44). And the case goes to the Magistracy. About them Koni

14"Srirangam's rarefied atmosphere has not prevented outbreaks of religious dissension, the bones of contention being little more than matters of ritual. There are two sects among the Vaishnavas, the 'Thengalais' which means, the southern sect, and the 'Vadagalais', the northern sect. The former believe that salvation is a matter of grace, the gift of a gratified Mahavishnu, which falls like gentle rain upon the fortunate elect, while the latter hold it must be striven for and is the reward for righteousness" (48).
says, "Their notions about the law of possession were of the haziest description, or if they were clear, they avoided acting upon them" (44). Finally the contentious parties reach the civil court.

In the Civil court the case drags on until Mahatmaji settles the issue when he visits Kedaram. The 'Thengalais' and 'Vadagalais' come and invite Gandhiji into the temple. Gandhiji comprehends that there is some misunderstanding between the sects. He asks the leader whether there is any communal strife — between the Hindus and Muslims — in the area and the leader replies that is the work of the Government. Then retorts Gandhiji: "Wicked people ... Not content with that, they have fomented trouble among the Aiyangars, haven't they?" (182) To this ironic question there is no answer and when Gandhiji rules out his visit to the temple till the British have gone away or until they settle their quarrels, the Aiyangars agree to settle it and Gandhiji visits the temple.

The final blow to all religious disputes is also given by the Mahatma himself. When he visits the temple, "all Kedaram was there" (183). Gandhiji asks the Sanskrit pundit to sing a few hymns of Kabir Das, in Hindi. When the hymn is over Gandhiji asks the priests, "Do you think that Varadaraja appreciated the Sanskrit and Hindi hymns?" "Of course"' they all shout together and then Gandhiji ridicules them: "And yet, you think he would be offended if each of you sing your hymns as you like?" (Chronicles 183). The priests are
ashamed at their earlier dispute and these words of Gandhiji give them back their good sense, which they have lost in the heat of litigation and acrimony. Thus the dispute is settled.

What the Brahmin sects in their mutual bitterness have lost sight of is the general apathy and outright contempt with which, the public at large, look at their unbecoming disputes. P.P.T. Chari, a Vaishnavite himself and the counsel to the 'Vadagalais', expresses some of the harshest views on the entire dispute and on the 'Vaishnavaites' themselves. When the counsel for the 'Thengalais', Vanchinatha Sastri, pleads for an early hearing thus: "Andal's wedding is approaching and the matter should be decided before then, your honour", Chari says: "Give Andal a rest for once, ... she must be tired of marrying the same old god year after year" (58). Hearing this blasphemy not only the 'Thengalais' but even the 'Vadagalais' are scandalised. As Koni says, "... Andal was a common possession, the daughter of every Vaishnavite household and to talk of her as though she was a flapper out of Hollywood, took their breath away" (58). But the Aiyangars themselves are responsible for inviting this scorn on them and on their gods by atheists like Chari. All strife is anathema to Nagarajan's ethos and the Aiyangar strife is the worst thing that can happen, as it is more on the question of mere superficial rituals, than on questions of belief.
Yet another favourite theme of Nagarajan is that all religious strifes originate from personal malice and jealousy between individuals than from other theological reasons. As in the 'Vadagalai-Thengalai' dispute, so too in the Muvakkudi riots between Hindus and Muslims apparently innocuous reasons are seen operating. Similarly, as in the Aiyangar dispute, the beneficiaries are a few lawyers. Hemadri cannot contain his excitement at the prospects: "More work for me, more work for Vasu and perhaps for P.P.T.Chari..." (148). Hemadri ultimately becomes the public prosecutor in charge of conducting the cases.

Thus, in this chapter, we have seen how caste decides, more than one's personal qualities, an individual's destiny in Indian society. Both Venkataramani and Nagarajan decry the system which judges a person on the basis of his caste—a mere accident of Mrth — rather than on his respective merits or demerits. Gandhiji's tireless efforts to undermine the age-old system and wipe out the evil of untouchability from the nation's social fabric have undoubtedly inspired both the novelists.

While picturising the disruptive role played by caste in Indian Society, Venkataramani and Nagarajan are aware that it is caste that is the main contributory factor to the fragmentary nature of the Hindu society. Both writers also detail the slow, yet sure process of change, that may lead to the dismantling of the caste structure and emancipation of
the Hindu psyche. The tortuous process of the liberation of Harijans from age old grooves of illiteracy and addiction to liquor and the aspiration of the backward classes for upward social mobility are symptomatic of the emerging new order in India. This is the overall picture that emerges from the fiction of Venkataramani and Nagarajan.