Chapter 3
Fact and Fiction: A Study of the Social Plays

Social inequality, compartmentalization of human beings into groups of privileged and the other, has marked human interaction in all societies at all times but while economic inequality is flexible and can be transcended, those based on religion, caste, sect and gender are more difficult to scale. In India caste, rather than class marks social reality. In such a society stratification of human beings and their related social significance are based on caste and jati. According to the varna system the brahmin who took care of religious, intellectual and philosophic matters –the more sublime aspects of being human –was at the top of the social ladder, while kshatriyas, vaishyas and sudras existed in a descending order of significance. Apart from these four castes there existed a fifth caste, which was made up of the untouchables who stood outside the varna system yet were inextricably linked to it, and indispensible for its smooth functioning as they were the ones who performed all the work that was deemed impure and demeaning for the upper castes to perform. They, the ones who removed filth and waste and ensured hygiene, were considered unclean; they lived away from the community proper, invisible and unacknowledged, except for the services they rendered. It is ironic that while earth and environment were deified, those who engaged most intimately with it and ensured its continuance, were considered inferior and shunned.

Restriction imposed on the study of the sacred texts was central to the ideology of brahminical hegemony; by making the study of the Vedas exclusive to the brahmans, knowledge and the authority to interpret the sacred texts became their exclusive domain. Restricting access to knowledge meant that they had the sole right to interpret the sacred texts. Manchanna Kramita’s cynical statement after he orders the extermination of the sharanas, “We are there to interpret the sacred texts. The King is there to implement our advice. That’s enough” (Telé-Danda, 79) sums up the hegemonic mind-set. Since the brahmans alone had access to the texts, the interpretations too were pro-brahmin. In Hayavadana the rishi when consulted, categorically declares the supremacy of the head over the body (40), a declaration that is convenient to Devadatta and Padmini.

It may be argued that the varna system ensured the smooth functioning of the social machinery and that it might have worked efficiently at a particular period of social
evolution. Nevertheless it was flawed as it was based on the unacceptable premise that ‘purity/pollution’ was intrinsic to human beings and drew rigid lines of demarcation based on caste. The four plays taken up for study in this chapter address the continuity of the caste-based mindset that is socially redundant and morally unjustifiable. Even today jati which “…refers to an endogamous unit within which one must marry; members of a jati are members of a descent group, traditionally assigned a specific occupation…It is jati which provides the framework for understanding the local hierarchies within a given region” (Chakravarti, 9). It continues to be an important element in defining social relationships. True, the vertical hierarchy of caste in its original form does not exist. As Dipankar Gupta observes, “…neither work nor the division of labour is organised on the principle of caste” (108). At the same time the evolution of Indian society and the resultant changes – independence, geographical mobility, and the emergence of new occupations – reveal that contrary to expectations, there has been no wearing out/dissolution of the system; the changes have only led to a spewing of sects and subsects that segregate people. The stifling effect of caste/sect divides continue to make its presence felt in the socio-economic space. Untouchability is still practiced in many parts of rural India. It is common to find villages and towns structured along communal lines, where religious and caste based divides are spatially identifiable. There are villages where untouchables are denied entry in streets inhabited by upper castes. The two glass system exists in several parts of the country. In urban localities discrimination based on caste and sect manifests in subtle forms that are difficult to pin point. They assume an overt form only when a member of a religion/ caste/sect confronts vague excuses when seeking access to areas/localities/offices occupied by a different community. But the ease with which the ‘difference’ surfaces whenever there is a clash of interests – as when members of two sects decide to marry – reveals that they are very much a part of the Indian social reality. Ironically, the unproblematic acceptance of the continued relevance of caste as intrinsic to social reality is a fact that is subtly ingrained into the individual psyche. It is equally significant that very often the idea of difference is “…enforced by power, and not by ideological acquiescence” (Gupta, 108). While this knowledge does not provide any consolation to those who are at the receiving end of religion and caste based discrimination it is something that should be kept in mind while tackling the evil, and that is what the plays perform in an oblique manner. The tremendous if ephemeral popularity enjoyed by Buddhism, Jainism and the Bhakti movement testifies to the eagerness on the part of the disempowered to cast off the yoke of submission. It is
significant that neither Islam nor Christianity spread to any great extent in the subcontinent, in spite of their being actively proselytizing religions. This may have something to do with their monotheistic nature, which is totally alien to the Indian psyche. It is equally significant that both Islam and Christianity as practiced in India are informed by notions of elitism, hierarchy and sect/region based divisions and therefore cannot be seen as positive indicators of intrinsic acceptance of diversity and difference.

As has been noted in the earlier chapter, religion and caste are highly malleable tools for socio-political mobilization in contemporary India. The forces that initiate such mobilizations are cynically manipulative in nature. The methods and objectives are highly suspect and the aftermath is often ethically unjustifiable. Attempts to address the larger pressing issues of poverty, illiteracy displacement, unemployment and gender discrimination are at best partial. Majority/minority/backward caste politics, is evidenced in the mushrooming of political groups and organizations that represent sects and subsects, but the formation of these has not led to the betterment of the lot of the disempowered and marginalized, who form the major part of the country’s population. The paradoxical situation that confronts the ordinary Indian citizen today is one of choosing between limiting polarities- one that is based on religion and caste based ‘quota politics’ (Gupta, 122) and the other, a fascist assertion of homogeneity, which refuses to see the individual as a product of overlapping identities of region, language, religion, caste and gender.

The common core that connects the social plays- Hayavadana, Naga-Mandala, Talé-Danda and The Fire and the Rain is the sensitive portrayal of the destructive aspects of exclusionist, reactionary prejudices based on community, caste and gender, often enforced through the hegemonic use of power. The plays sensitize the spectator to the distinction between ‘enforced difference’ as in the case of caste and gender, and an individual’s ‘right to be different’. The mythical-fictional structure of the plays that positions them outside the contemporary spatial and temporal frame, underscores familiar patterns of social interaction that enable the spectator to recognize the deep-rootedness of caste and gender based hegemonic practices, their canker-like survival into the present and the active role they play in denying the individual the right to dignity as a human being. The additions, omissions and re-workings of the root material are integral to the power of the plays to highlight the complex ways in which caste and
gender interact at both personal and public levels. While they are markers of significance for some, they become instruments of oppression, humiliation, segregation and ghettoization for others.

*The Fire and the Rain* offers an oblique but strident criticism of caste-based hegemonic practices, particularly brahminical hegemony and attendant practices. However, the shadowy presence of Bharadwaja, Yavakri’s father assures the spectator that the critique is not an instance of brahmin baiting, but of hegemonical mindset and practices. Bharadwaja is emblematic of the essence of the word brahmin in its semantic sense. The impulses that motivate his son Yavakri, as well as Raibhya and Paravasu are distortions of it. The irony is that the latter who long for the trappings of brahminical power, are contemptuous of the saintly, unworldly and genuinely spiritual Bharadwaja.

The fire sacrifice, which forms the pivotal event of the play, becomes emblematic of the real and symbolic relevance of the ideals of austerity, piety and sacrifice vis-à-vis their actual manifestations. Andhaka—surely the name is no accident—and Nittilai represent the divergent responses towards meditation and asceticism, two important tools employed by brahminism to attain spiritual power:

Andhaka: Ten years of rigorous penance. And still Lord Indra would not oblige. Finally Yavakri stood in the middle of a circle of fire and started offering his limbs to the fire—first his fingers, then his eyes, then his entrails, his tongue and at last, his heart—that’s when the god appeared to him, restored his limbs, and granted him the boon.

Nittilai: (simply, with no offence meant) Did he tell you all this Grandfather?

Andhaka: Don’t be silly. A man of his stature wouldn’t talk about himself!

Nittilai: Then how does everyone know what happened in a remote corner of the jungle...why are brahmins so secretive about everything? ...fire sacrifices are conducted in covered enclosures. They mortify themselves in the dark of the jungle. Even their gods appear so secretly. Why? What are they afraid of? (9-10).

Nittilai’ words gain ironic significance because it is the secrecy and inaccessibility that surround knowledge and religious rituals, that ensures brahminical supremacy over
others. For Raibhya, Yavakri and Paravasu meditation and austerity are merely means to attain power. Yavakri’s decade long rigorous penance becomes tainted when he exploits Vishakha’s loneliness in order to seduce her, a deliberately vindictive act, to get even with Raibhya and Paravasu. Raibhya is no better. The years spent in studying the sacred texts and practicing austerities do not enable him to rise above petty feelings of anger and jealousy. He bitterly resents the fact that he has been sidelined and Paravasu has been made the chief priest to conduct the fire sacrifice. Raibhya’s verbal and physical violence towards Vishakha, the rough and crude language that he employs to abuse her and Paravasu, are manifestations of his anger. “So you measured my life-span, did you—you and your king? ...Tell the king I shall outlive my sons...Tell him the swarm of dogs sniffing around my daughter-in-law’s bottom keeps me in good shape” (29). Paravasu on his part, suspects that Raibhya summoned the Brahma Rakshasa to disrupt the fire sacrifice. Selfish and egotistical, he ignores his wife, refuses to help the Brahma Rakshasa and betrays his brother. Paravasu’s stated preference for the fire sacrifice - formal, structured “...involves no emotional acrobatics from the participants” (31), reflects the soulless practice of rituals, where they are degraded to being empty gestures, devoid of spiritual significance.

Deliberate and determined assertion and perpetuation of difference is perhaps the greatest evil wrought by caste. It underlies and taints all relationships and surfaces in conscious and unconscious ways. The Devadatta-Kapila friendship in Hayavadana, like the Devyani-Sharmishta friendship in Yayati, seems to transcend caste but the hierarchy inherent in the relationship cannot be missed and surfaces the moment there is a conflict of interest. In Talé-Danda, Mallibomma accepts Jagadeva as a fellow sharana and interacts with him on equal terms. But the relationship undergoes a subtle change when the two enter the brahmin locality. Jagadeva assumes an idealistic stance and overrides Mallibomma’s reluctance to enter the house; Jagadeva’s stubborn insistence turns an act intended to erase difference, into one that asserts it as an unchangeable reality. Significantly, the idealistic stance only increases Mallibomma’s embarrassment as it makes him conscious of his otherness, something that his identity as a sharana had helped him overcome till then. Both the friendship and the bitter hatred that marks the Devyani-Sharmishta relationship emanate from caste-based difference. Sharmishta showers Devyani with gifts because Devyani accepts her as a friend, on equal terms and does not refer to her caste. For this very reason, Devyani’s angry reaction to the accidental
exchange of the upper garment, comes as a shock. The bitter hatred that follows stems from the sense of betrayal, all the more powerful as it is unexpected. When compared to Raibhya, Yavakri and Paravasu, Arvasu who is sensitive, affectionate and generous is almost an aberration, and the qualities that mark him are either lost on the others, or are employed as means to exploit him, as Yavakri and Paravasu do. Raibhya views him with contempt. It is significant that it is the drought that has been continuing for several years and the large-scale exodus of the community from the village that makes it possible for Arvasu to become engaged to Nittilai, a tribal girl. As Raibhya is too engrossed in his all-consuming jealousy and Paravasu is away conducting the fire sacrifice, there is no one to prevent the transgression. Therefore Arvasu decides to reject his caste and marry Nittilai. Yet, after performing the last rites for Yavakri, he takes a bath to cleanse himself. The act is significant as it reveals the intimate link between caste and life style which marks the Indian social reality, and the manner in which caste-based ritualistic acts condition the individual’s thought processes and actions. In spite of the fact that he has decided to give up his caste Arvasu cannot free himself from the belief system and ritualistic acts he has internalized and practiced for so long. It is not just brahmins, every caste and community has its own specific set of norms. Nittilai’s refusal to allow Arvasu to touch her is based on her tribal norms. The same conformity to caste-based behaviour surfaces in Jagadeva’s vow of celibacy in Tale-Danda. But the most powerful and poignant instance the plays provide is that of the dying Sambashiva Shastri, Jagadeva’s father. Fear of death and his son’s absence make him delirious. He thinks he is an unattended corpse:

Shastri. Jagga—

Jagadeva. I’m here.

Shastri. Not you. My son! He has to be there for the cremation. Tell him the corpse is beginning to stink. It’ll get worse. Call him. Jagganna----come. Remove the corpse----(7).

Significantly caste norms are perpetuated as much as a means of power, as a means of ensuring one’s membership in a group/community, distinguishing oneself from another. Each caste has its own caste specific norms and practices, to guide and control member-behaviour and to maintain its position within the hierarchy. In Tale-Danda Kalyani tells Lalita that they are cobbler, not skinners or tanners. Her husband Harlayya explains:
"The holeyas skin the carcass. The madigas and the dohas tan the hide. Only then does it come to us" (40). The explanation is significant because it reveals the internalization of the caste hierarchy, and its existence among the lower castes as well. The words contain the unsaid message that Harlayya’s caste is superior to the holeyas, the madigas and the dohas. While there are no caste specific delineations or references in Naga-Mandala, Appanna does speak of calling a chandal to remove the carcass of the dog killed by the cobra. This kind of caste-determined allocation of jobs makes it impossible for someone to abandon his own caste-based occupation and take up another job assigned to some other caste. Harlayya’s words in Talé-Danda gain significance against this reality: “My wife and I became sharanas, gave up meat and alcohol, and our ancient gods. Now when our children ask us: ‘Why then are we still stitching the same old scraps of leather?’ What can I answer? If my son decides to change his vocation, will the weavers accept him? Will the potters open their ranks?” (41). The feeling of insecurity that the burden of caste instills in the marginalized ‘other’, is vividly depicted in the abrupt manner in which the engagement between Arvasu and Nittilai comes to an end. Nittilai’s father likes Arvasu, but he is unsure of the ‘brahmin’s’ sincerity. “These high-caste men are glad enough to bed our women but not to wed them” (8). The fear that Arvasu might not keep his promise and thus subject him and his family to the ridicule of the tribe, prompts him to change his decision and not to wait till sun down—the time given to Arvasu to appear before the Council of Elders and seek their permission to marry Nittilai. The sensitive manner in which the plays address the issue of caste, highlights its limiting affects not only on the oppressed, but on the privileged ones as well. For instance, Devyani is to be pitied as much as Sharmishta because her caste and the fact that she is Shukracharya’s daughter are her only claims to relevance. Realizing her vulnerability Sharmishta takes revenge by hinting that Yayati married Devyani, as a means to learn the mantra of immortality from her father. The insidious tactic is doubly effective as it reminds Devyani of Kaccha’s duplicity. Padmini’s sati in Hayavadana is perhaps the most powerful instance the plays provide of how consciousness of societal norms directs human behaviour and decisions. Padmini’s sati cannot claim any of the noble motives attributed to the act. For Padmini who knows she cannot return to the village—where she will have to confront the questions of family and society —sati is the only way out. Padmini’s sati is therefore both a parody and an affirmation of the power of social norms to shape and direct human behaviour.
Together the plays reflect the complex implications of caste-based practices on both privileged and marginalized groups. The reactions of the marginalized, vary from unquestioning acceptance as in the case of Andhaka, helpless submission like that of Kapila, to frustration, insecurity, bitterness, and refusal to listen to the voice of reason as witnessed in the determination of the sharanas to conduct the inter-caste marriage. Resentment of restrictive boundaries can be liberating when they take a collective form of united resistance, but such attempts often end in violence and bloodshed due to two reasons – the determination of the privileged groups to maintain the status-quo and the lack of directional and cohesive guidance that mark acts of resistance by the marginalized. The depiction of caste-based prejudices from multiple perspectives—without privileging any one perspective—enables the plays to sensitize the spectator to exclusionist strategies that de-humanize both victim and perpetrator. Basavanna’s cautionary words in *Talé-Danda* are significant: “...we have a long way to go...the most terrible crimes have been justified in the name of sanatana religion” (39).

As stated earlier dramatizing myth highlights the hegemony implicit in all organized power structures, not just brahminical. The sense of autonomy conferred on them by the movement, prompt the sharanas to perpetrate the same crimes that they themselves were subjected to. The play refers to their attacking and occupying Jain temples, “...threatening to smash idols and turn them into a Shiva temple” (28). Jagadeva tries to rationalize the act by citing provocation by the Jains; he also justifies the attack by referring to the solitary saint Ramayya, who led the attack on a Jain temple, threw out the non-believers and established his right to their temple by performing a miracle. It is equally significant that caste identities continue to exist within the sharana community. Sheelavanta refers to sharana children calling Kalavati ‘cobbler’s priestess’ (41). The mythic structure of the plays sensitizes the spectator to the need to rise above the ephemeral fascination for new ideologies, to reject chimera like isms, and imbibe the true meaning of being human:

Showing off my eighty-eight miracles

my bhakti has become

a carnival wardrobe (25)
The origin of religion lies in the natural desire of human beings to believe in a supernatural power that can protect them from calamities, natural and otherwise, a desire that manifests itself in specific ritualized acts. It is at a much later stage that the belief systems get formalized and dogmas are evolved. But when that happens and religion becomes organized, power structures emerge and the primary aim of religion—which is to give solace—is compromised. *The Fire and the Rain* projects the reductionism that underlies the ritualization of belief, whereby it limits spirituality to a set of soullessly performed rituals that divide people into privileged and the other. Knowingly or not, Paravasu kills his father. He shifts the burden of cremating Raibhya on to Arvasu, citing the excuse of the fire sacrifice that needs to go on without disruption. What cannot be condoned is the brazen audacity of the act of accusing Arvasu of a crime that he himself committed. Fire and water are two dominant mythopoetic symbols, as they bear the multiple suggestions of purifying, life giving, rejuvenating, appeasing etc. That Paravasu—who is guilty of patricide and treachery—is the one who oversees the fire sacrifice, meant to please Lord Indra, and thereby bring rain to the parched land, thus resonates with ironic significance.

Kamad has often referred to the story of the first performance as narrated in *Natyasastra*, to highlight the immediacy of response that theatre provokes. The *Natyasastra* refers to drama as the fifth Veda. The play enacted towards the end of *The Fire and the Rain* highlights drama as ritual sacrifice or yagna. Arvasu who enacts the role Vritra, the demon, is so consumed by despair, that the enactment of the treacherous killing of Vishwarupa by Indra ruptures the separation between actor and character, leading to the merging of the two persona. The performance is disrupted, and Arvasu is confronted with the choice of either bringing Nittilai back to life or liberating the Brahma Rakshasa. Knowing that Nittilai would have wanted him to ask for the Brahma Rakshasa’s release, Arvasu does so, sacrificing his desire to bring her back to life. It is Arvasu’s personal sacrifice, not the ritual yagna that brings rain. Significantly even as Arvasu voices his decision, Paravasu enters the fire. The simultaneity of the acts is a powerful instance of the use of aesthetic restraint (aucitya) and suggestive richness (dhvani). Since theatre is visual and aural, the spectator sees Paravasu entering the fire and thereby confronts a choice—he can accept either act as the bringer of rain. The scene thus provides a powerful visual endorsement of the power of sacrifice and the symbolic richness of fire and rain. The finer aspects of Arvasu’s personal sacrifice, its links to the
Brahma Rakshasa’s release and the gift of rain, register at the subconscious level. The aesthetic enjoyment thus evoked is the result of the coming together of conscious and unconscious understanding of the significance of the enactment.

If sex defines a human being’s biological identity, patriarchy is the single most powerful construct that regulates sexual behaviour. Kumkum Sangari uses the term patriarchies to denote systems of subordinating women, which function “...simultaneously through coercion or the threat and practice of violence, through a wide social consensus drawn from and dispersed over many areas of social life ...” (467). In the Indian context, hegemonic power structures are enforced through a combination of caste and patriarchal norms. The triumph of patriarchy is of course the effective relegation of women to a subordinate position. The woman is conditioned from birth to accept the subordinate position as natural and legitimate, fostering a state of mind where she accepts her role as caretaker of patriarchal norms with conviction and fervour. In a patriarchal society woman is expected to be chaste and submissive. In her essay “Caste and Women” Leela Dubey writes, “The cultural apprehensions of the vulnerability of women and the emphasis on their purity and restrained behavior which entail limited interaction with the opposite sex, are important components of management of female sexuality in a caste society” (12). The success of patriarchy lies in its power to subordinate the needs/aspirations and rights of the female subject to those of the male. Its greatest achievement however lies in its manipulation of women to become its standard-bearers, willing foot soldiers who ensure its survival and implement strict adherence to its tenets. Denial of women’s sexuality and control of female sexuality are central to patriarchal society. The Apastamba Dharmasutra (11.6.13.7) dated from circa fifth to third centuries B.C. lays down the rule that a man should ensure that no other man goes near his wife lest his ‘seed’ gets into her. Evolved as part of the caste system, it consolidated that mating had to be restricted only to prescribed partners in order to secure caste purity.

The patriarchal mechanism of control operates on women through three devices and at three levels - the first is ideology. For the correct transition of a girl to wife to mother and ensuring continuity of the male race, ‘vansha’, the woman’s sexuality had to be managed —first by father and brother, then by husband and later by son. In India where arranged marriage is still the norm, conformity to social norms is a necessary virtue for women as
daughter, daughter-in-law, wife and mother. The Story’s introduction in Naga-Mandala is significant for two reasons. A girl loved and cherished in her parental home is married off to a stranger and is expected to get accustomed to an unfamiliar way of life, to start afresh in a totally new setting.

Story: A young girl. Her name...it doesn’t matter. But she was an only daughter, so her parents called her Rani. Queen. Queen of the whole world. Queen of the long tresses. For when her hair was tied up in a knot, it was as though a black King Cobra lay curled on the nape of her neck, coil upon glistening coil. When it hung loose, the tresses flowed, a torrent of black, along her young limbs, and got entangled in her silver anklets. Her fond father found her a suitable husband. The young man was rich and his parents were both dead. Rani continued to live with her parents until she reached womanhood. Soon, her husband came and took her with him to his village. His name was—well, any common name will do—

Man: Appanna?

Story: Appanna (6).

The inference is clear; Appanna is every man, the typical male. As stated earlier once a girl attains womanhood, she is uprooted from her parental home and replanted in the alien soil of her husband’s home. Since patriarchy conditions the girl child from infancy, to accept her secondary position as natural and pre-ordained, she submits to male domination without protest. The subordinate position is manifested in two ways — the refusal of autonomy and commoditization. The plays provide several instances of both these manifestations. Appanna’s overtly aggressive behaviour as well as Paravasu’s sexual intimacies with Vishakha which are pure self-gratification, and which do not take into consideration her desires or needs, highlight the authority patriarchy invests in the male subject. Yavakri’s planned seduction of Vishakha and Raiybhya’s obscene references to her are instances of commoditization where the woman is denied dignity and treated as an object. Irrespective of the caste they belong to, women are objects. Nittilai is first a pawn to her father’s ego, then to those of her brother and her husband. For both the husband and the brother her transgression is a challenge to their pride and their manhood, and they can overcome the humiliation only by killing her. They therefore hunt her down, the way they would hunt prey, and slash her neck without bothering to
find out why she ran away from her husband's house. The scene is a chilling reminder of
the 'honour killings' that have occurred in recent times. The brutal act is expected to
expunge the shame and emasculating effect of Nittilai's act. As a gendered subject her
actions are defined by culture specific norms related to her sexuality. Therefore unlike
her male counterpart, Nittilai cannot afford the luxury of humanitarian gestures.

The male subject might vary in temperament and needs. He might be a weak and
besotted intellectual like Devadatta, a masochist and sadist like Appanna, or indifferent
like Jagadeva and Paravasu. But the connecting strain is the lack of sensitivity towards
women and their needs. By marrying Rani and bringing her home, Appanna fulfils his
obligation to family and society. Having done that, he continues to visit his concubine.
He does not even consummate the marriage, because the wife is a possession, to have
when he wants. His interaction with her is limited to daily visits at noon, when she cooks
and serves him food. The visits are assertions of authority and ownership and are intended
to ensure that the 'object' is safe. As she is a 'possession' he locks her up when he
leaves, preventing all interaction with the outside world. He gets a dog to guard the house
against visitors like the old Kurudavva, and when the cobra kills it, he gets a mongoose.
Appanna does not acknowledge Rani's need for love and companionship, and is
indifferent to her fears.

Rani: Listen-(Fumbling for words) Listen-I feel-frightened-alone at night

Appanna: What is there to be scared of? Just keep to yourself. No one will bother
you. Rice!

Rani: Please, you could-

Appanna: Look, I don't like idle chatter. Don't question me. Do as you are told and
you won't be punished (6).

The interactions are limited to utilitarian demands- rice, milk, or water. Appanna does not
bother to answer Rani's questions; does not think that she deserves an answer. He
expects silent subservience. The one time she deviates—when she goes out into the yard
to pour out the magic potion—he slaps her. The irony, that it was her concern for
Appanna's safety that prompted the deviation is not lost on the spectator. In Tale-Danda,
when Lalita ruptures the glorious idealistic dream bubble of the inter-caste marriage between Sheelavanta and Kalavati by mentioning everyday reality, Madhuvarasa orders her to be quiet and threatens to thrash her, prompting Basavanna’s wife Gangambika to intervene: “Shame on you, Madhuvanna. Women and cattle, they are all the same to you, aren’t they?” (42). Jagadeva gives up his caste to become a sharana, but he does not think that the sharana ideal of equality and respect applies to women, especially a wife. He has no kind word or glance for her; intoxicated by his role in the movement he forgets his duties as son and as husband. The sight of his wife irritates him. He does not consider the possibility that his decision to become a sharana might subject his wife and mother to social ostracism. The fact remains that patriarchy prescribes different codes of conduct for men and women. Women are expected to silently endure all atrocities, physical and mental. Raibhya torments his daughter-in-law in both ways. His knowledge of scriptures and ascetic powers do not restrain him from using harsh and crude language to abuse Vishakha. Neither do they enable him to realize the immaturity that underlies the act, whereby he makes his daughter-in-law the butt to take out his frustration against his son. As for Nittilai, he dismisses her as a tribal and therefore a savage. She does not count.

Women are objects— to be used, won, manipulated and exploited. In Yayati, Chitralekha’s acquiescence to marry Pr̄ru is a tacit acceptance of the role patriarchy designates to her as a womb, as one who is to ensure the survival of the dynasty. Significantly, Pr̄ru does not ask her consent before exchanging his youth for his father’s old age. Her opinion does not matter. Yayati reveals the same indifference when he who shudders at the thought of premature ageing, unashamedly asks Chitralekha to accept the shrunken Pr̄ru. He exhorts her to ennoble herself through the act. The double standards that underlie patriarchy come to the fore in his shock and disgust when Chitralekha makes the half-crazed suggestion that he should satisfy her youth. He calls her evil for entertaining unchaste thoughts. In The Fire and the Rain Nittilai, for all her independence and resourcefulness, is a victim—first of her father’s pride, and later those of her brother and her husband. The father’s hasty decision not to wait for Arvasu, stems from his fear of being humbled and humiliated before the tribe. To save his pride he willingly sacrifices his daughter’s happiness and decides to marry her off to “... anyone who’ll take her” (27). In the case of Madhuvarasa, the decision to give his daughter in marriage to Sheelavanta, is his exuberant endorsement of his new fad. While the daughter has no say in the matter, the mother’s misgivings are dismissed as irrelevant. Harlayya
describes Kalavati as a coveted object that has fallen into his son’s lap, causing Gangambika to remark caustically: ‘A woman is just a ripe mango on a roadside tree for all of you, isn’t she? One more challenge to your manhood!’ (42).

The second device employed by patriarchy to subjugate women is the control of her body granted to kinsmen. Since patriarchy denies women autonomy, a woman’s response to male dictates is prescribed to be one of silent unquestioning obedience. She is forced to stifle her desires or else resort to subversive means to win her husband’s love, like Kurudavva’s use of the magic root to win her husband’s love. Since patriarchy does not allow a way out for the female subject, Rani too has no other choice. *Naga-Mandala* projects the double standards inherent to the patriarchal response to sexual aberration. Patriarchy does not impose any restriction on male sexuality. Appanna continues to visit his concubine even after he brings Rani home. But he reacts violently when he discovers that she is pregnant; he pushes her to the floor, kicks her, and drags her into the street, swearing that he will abort the foetus. Thwarted from achieving that goal, he goes to the village elders.

The mythical base as well as overtly stylized structure enables *Hayavadana* to challenge patriarchy’s control over female sexuality in an insidious and highly subversive manner. Significantly the challenge is introduced through the tale of *Hayavadana* whose mother preferred the horse to the Prince and the gandharva. When the enraged gandharva curses her to become a horse, she gallops off with carefree abandon. The Princess’ attraction for the horse is significant as the equine form is a popular symbol of male sexuality. Patriarchy’s denial of female sexuality is highlighted in the provocative choral song in *Hayavadana*: “A head for each breast. A pupil for each eye. A side for each arm. I have neither regret nor shame” (11). The choral song reinforces the challenge to patriarchy posed in the sub plot. The song, which is repeated towards the end of the play, challenges the taboo patriarchy places on a woman viewing herself as a sexual being. Patriarchal and caste norms prompt Padmini to marry the brahmin Devadatta in spite of the attraction that she feels towards Kapila. Her accidental transposition of heads is an overt expression of her subconscious desires, a fact that is revealed through Goddess Kali’s cynical comment: My dear daughter, there should be a limit even to honesty. Anyway –So be it!” (33).
The third device of patriarchal control is the power vested in society -meaning males, to punish deviance. In the Indian context, the village-sthala, grama- is still the primary unit of social interaction among people. It is the venue that ensures that caste and patriarchal norms are implemented; it checks aberrations, punishes acts of transgression and thereby preserves caste and patriarchal norms. It conditions the individual to see herself/himself in terms of her/his caste and sex. It lays down the rules for permissible interaction between and across caste/gender divides and ensures their implementation. The individual is conditioned to obey the norms. The village Elders do not chastise Appanna for continuing to visit the concubine. Neither do they chastise him for beating Rani because patriarchy grants male kinsmen the authority “. . . to use coercion and physical chastisement against women who violate the codes laid down for them” (Chakravarti, 76). But they decide to conduct a trial, and punish Rani in case she is proven guilty. The village council made up of elders of the village represents the overt physical form of patriarchy that controls female sexuality and checks deviance. Rani is given the option to confess her guilt or prove her innocence by means of trials that are not just barbaric but unrealistic as well. “The traditional test in our Village Court has been to take the oath while holding a red-hot iron in the hand. Occasionally, the accused has chosen to plunge the hand in boiling oil.” (36). It is easy to imagine the outcome of either of the tests. The woman will burn/scald her hand, the ‘inevitable’ result will be accepted as proof of transgression, and punishment will follow. The proclamation projects the blatant injustice that makes such practices acceptable.

It is interesting that the origin of many folk tales may be traced to life-cycle related rituals. Like several other folk tales, the story of Rani and Appanna is structured around the narrative of female sexuality in patriarchal discourse. It initiates a young girl to the wholly new way of life in the husband’s house, and conditions her to submit quietly to the strange environment, the new duties, responsibilities and restrictions on movement expected of a young bride. At a time when early marriages were the norm such folk tales enabled the young bride to accept the bewildering duality she was to expect from the husband- ardent passionate lover at night and silent, indifferent householder during the day. Several restrictions existed in traditional households, which prevented interaction between male and female members. The folk tale thus initiates a young bride to the behaviour she should expect from the husband. Interestingly even Naga who is more human than the human Appanna, tells Rani not to ask questions. Of course, the Naga’s
refusal to answer Rani’s questions arises from the need to keep his identity secret; nevertheless, it underlines the fact that the refusal to accept women on equal terms is integral to the patriarchal concept of man-woman relationship. Appanna and the Naga are similar in that respect. The tale also warns the young bride of the penalty of transgressing patriarchal norms. Kannad’s dramatization enables the tale to project the need for love and sensitivity in addressing the young bride’s needs. So great is the need that Rani stifles her doubts regarding Naga’s identity, for the few hours of love and companionship his presence gives her. It is in this context that Rani’s bitter words gain significance:

Don’t ask questions. Do as I tell you. Don’t ask questions. Do as I tell you. No. I won’t ask questions. I shall do what you tell me. Scowls in the day. Embraces at night. The face in the morning unrelated to the touch at night. But day or night, one motto does not change; Don’t ask questions. Do as I tell you... Why don’t you take it on trust that I have a mind and explain this charade to me? (32).

As stated earlier, the greatest victory of patriarchy is that it transformed women into accessories that promoted its hegemonic goals. Kurudavva is Appanna’s mother’s friend, who helped bring him into the world, yet she does not rebuke him for ill-treating his wife or visiting the concubine. Instead, she gives Rani the magical root to win his love. Even the high-spirited Padmini does not dare to reject Devadatta’s suite. Her decision to commit sati and her last act of ensuring that her son is first brought up by the forest folk so that he imbibes their physical strength and manliness, and later be taken to Devadatta’s parents to ensure that he inherits the caste supremacy, is a tacit acceptance of the norms laid down by patriarchy and caste.

_Naga-Mandala_ highlights the mind-set of a structured traditional society where community-based options are often binary, where deification is an important tool for incorporating unexplainable aberrations within the domain of acceptable behaviour. Sexual deviance, such as Rani’s, has either to be exposed and punished; or declared as an instance of divine intervention. Deviance becomes acceptable only if it can don the mantle of a miracle. Rani who swears by the cobra without being bitten by it, attains the status of a goddess. Here again it is the Council of Elders who possess the magisterial powers to decide. Once the Elders pronounce her innocent and a goddess, Appanna is helpless.
Elder I: Appanna, your wife is not an ordinary woman. She is a goddess incarnate. Don’t grieve that you judged her wrongly and treated her badly. This is how goddesses reveal themselves to the world. You were the chosen instrument for revealing her divinity.

Elder II: Spend the rest of your life in her service. You need merit in ten past years to be chosen for such holy duty.

Elder III: Bless us, Mother. Bless our children (40).

Once the Elders proclaim her innocence, Appanna has no choice but to accept Rani and her unborn child.

It is interesting to note how the roles are reversed once Rani is conferred the status of goddess. Appanna is asked to serve her with devotion for the rest of his life. Though he is baffled and mortified, he suppresses his disbelief and accepts the verdict because his space in the social framework depends on his willingness to conform to its norms; moreover, he has his share of reflected glory. He therefore becomes a willing and devoted husband, and his concubine a devoted servant. That Rani is able to persuade Appanna to agree to make their son perform the funeral rites for Naga-rites that a son performs for the father—even when he (Appanna) is alive, is made possible by society’s acceptance of her divinity. All Appanna can say is “…aren’t you going too far? I mean…Of course, there is no question of saying no. You are the goddess herself incarnate. Any wish of yours will be carried out” (44).

Patriarchal subjugation of women is most vividly depicted in Naga-Mandala. The play poignantly presents how silence—a virtue patriarchy advocates for the female subject often becomes the woman’s sole refuge. Locked in the house, Rani fantasizes about an eagle who carries her across the seven seas, to a magical garden in an island, where her parents wait for her. She also fantasizes about a stag with golden antlers, which is actually a prince. Both fantasies project the need for love and companionship. While Rani does not fully comprehend the mystery of Naga’s identity she half-realizes that it is not Appanna, but consciously stifles her doubts, because the available alternative is a horrible loveless loneliness. After the Elders proclaim her divinity and Appanna accepts her as his wife, Rani gains everything a woman could want—a devoted husband, a son, a servant as
well as the aura of divinity. But the happiness brings along the burden of realization:
“…Don’t you think she must have cried out in anguish to know the answer!” (41). But
her tears and sorrow remain unexpressed. She does not speak out; instead submits to a life
of domesticity with Appanna and her son.

The irony of the subjugation enforced on women becomes all the more poignant as it is
underscored by the spectator’s realization that very often the women emerge stronger than
men, emotionally and spiritually. Men dominate, thanks to patriarchy but the limitations
and curbs imposed on women’s autonomy only serve to highlight them as the true source
of strength – Rani lives with the burden of a partially recognized consciousness of truth;
Padmini plans for her son—a childhood spent among the hunters, then the return to the elite
brahmin household of Devadatta’s parents—which is her last attempt to circumvent the
limiting norms of a patriarchal society. Vishakha braves her father-in-law’s wrath to try
and save Yavakri from the Brahma Rakshasa invoked by Raibhya but when she realizes
that he manipulated her she throws away the life-saving elixir. She also attempts to save
Arvasu from being manipulated by her husband. Nittilai is warm, loving and loyal. Her
leaving her husband is not an act of desertion. She leaves her home when she hears of
Arvasu’s illness and stays on to nurse him back to health. She takes the decision, knowing
well what the consequences will be. Though she ends up being a sacrificial victim of
patriarchal pride, her goodness continues to prevail even after her death, for it is Arvasu’s
decision to do what she would have wanted—ask for the Brahma Rakshasa’s release—that
brings rain to the land. The plays highlight the innate strength, and resilience of women.
But the tragedy is that these qualities do not safeguard these women from pain and
suffering. Chitralekha commits suicide, Padmini commits sati, Jagadeva’s wife and
mother become outcastes, warm and generous Nittilai is hunted down and killed like an
animal, Vishakha is deserted, while Rani is forced to live a lie.

In keeping with the tenor of prismatic reflection of all aspects of an issue, the plays do
not confine themselves to the depiction of the effect of patriarchy on women alone.
Patriarchy lays down norms of behavioural expectations for men as well. If women are
expected to be chaste and submissive, men are expected to conform to caste-based
notions of masculinity. Thus while the brahmin’s physicality is underplayed, the body and
virility are the overt symbols of manhood for the kshatriya. Puru’s difference from the
kshatriya norm disappoints both Yayati and Chitralekha. Karnad’s Yayati provokes the
spectator to wonder whether it is the consciousness of his otherness that prompts Puru to take on the burden of the curse, whether it is his way of gaining significance and relevance. Bijjala who exults in his masculinity is openly contemptuous of Sovideva, leaving him bitter and humiliated. This turns him into a pliable weapon for Manchanna Kramita’s to employ to neutralize Bijjala. In both instances, the attempts to seek relevance end in disaster.

As in the case of the history plays, the two-plot structure enables the use of parallelism, contrast and symbolism to highlight multiple significations. The sub-plot of *Hayavadana* or the horse headed man, runs parallel to the tale of Devadatta, Kapila and Padmini. But unlike the Princess in the subplot, Padmini is not satisfied with an either or choice; she wants both, the perfect mate. Her attempts to achieve this are doomed to failure and she commits sati, leaving behind her mute son. Hayavadana’s attempts to become a horse end in his becoming a horse with a human voice. While it is not a perfect ending for Hayavadana, it has the happy result of making the child laugh out loud. The unsaid message of coming to terms with life with all its imperfections leads to the generation of aesthetic satisfaction in the spectator. The subversive challenge posed to patriarchal denial of female sexuality makes itself felt in a gradual, unobtrusive way. In *Naga­Mandala* the man, the flames and the Story perform a choral function, as the Story introduces the main plot, which is Rani’s story. The subplot of Kurudavva and her son runs parallel to the main plot, reinforcing the story of the Naga’s love for Rani with the story of the otherworldly presence that has bewitched her son. It is Kurudavva’s grief stricken lament that awakens a partial understanding of the truth in Rani, prompting her to take her oath ‘truthfully’. In *Talé-Danda* the scenes depicting the effect of the sharana movement on Jagadeva’s family and the inter-caste wedding, run parallel to the main plot which dramatizes the rise and fall of the sharana cult. It effectively represents how both the privileged and the marginalized become victims of the backlash of attempts to challenge hegemonic structures. In *The Fire and the Rain* the story of Arvasu, Nittilai and the Brahma Rakshasa runs parallel to the main narrative of the fire sacrifice. While Paravasu, Raibhya and Yavakri represent orthodoxy, Arvasu and Nittilai stand for love and human goodness. It is their ennobling sacrifice that brings rain to the land. In each of the plays, the subplot provides a refracted image of the concerns that dominate the main plot, thereby underscoring their message.
Works Cited


