Chapter IV

Community Concerns – I

For the sake of the family sacrifice the individual; for the community the family; for the country the community, and for the soul, the whole world.

Quoted in Radhakrishnan (2000)

4.1.1. Introduction: Homogenising Diversity?

Family and Class have, both, emerged as homogenising factors in the depiction of the Indian ethos in the context of the Indian English novel of the 1980s. This has resulted in the surfacing of some kind of uniformity in the life-patterns of various communities. In the last two chapters, the pan-Indian life styles, cutting across even class boundaries, the patriarchal structures, and the hegemony of the joint family ideology, have been explored; the novels are, thus, seen to portray a standardization of all the communities depicted. No doubt, the notion of Indianness itself is largely homogenising, and can be explained in terms of the seminal concept of ‘Sanskritisation’ that Srinivas has developed in the context of the caste system in sociological studies (Srinivas 1989). According to him, Sanskritisation refers to

The process by which a low caste or tribe or another group takes over the customs, rituals, beliefs, ideology, and style
This ironing out of differences between communities and even classes has, therefore, been related to the appropriation of the ideology and life-styles of dominant or powerful cultures by the ones lower down in the social scale, the desire to present a common, united front to the coloniser and to the preservation of indigenous structures like the joint family in an attempt to reassert one’s culture in the colonised set-up. Now, what needs to be reiterated is the ‘heterogeneity of mentalities’ (Memmi 1990:103), and the co-existence, sometimes peaceful, sometimes uneasy, of the various communities that go into the making of the nation.

4.1.2. Interrogating the Pan – Indianness in the Indian English Novel of the 1980s

The Indian English Novel, by its very nature, has been viewed as a pan-Indian phenomenon, because even though English is spoken by just a little over 6% of India’s population, and is largely urban-concentrated, it is spread out across the country. The Indian English writer, by and large, belongs to the class of ‘Macaulayised Indians’ that the last chapter focuses on. They write for a national, maybe, even an international audience, and the community affiliations of the
writers/characters do not often come to the forefront. However, community-specific concerns are voiced strongly in a work like Allan Sealy's *The Trotternama*, which addresses itself to the insecurities and identity crisis faced by the Anglo-Indian community in India; the Parsi ethos has been extensively explored in the novels of Rohinton Mistry and Firdaus Kanga, provoking a critic like Nilufer Bharucha to ask 'Why all this Parsiness?' (Bharucha and Nabar 1998), the underlying implication being that the question of Parsi identity has been over-flogged. *Days of the Turban* is concerned with the politicisation of the Sikh-Hindu identity. The other novels under consideration are not directly or overtly conscious of communal identity: they are located within specific religious and linguistic communities, but are not conscious explorations of community concerns: so, *Midnight's Children*, a novel with a Muslim background deals with the processes of the Indianisation, or the disruptions in these processes, among the Muslims, as well as the other communities whose cameo presences give it a cosmopolitan flavour.

Seven of the nine novels analysed are situated within the Hindu community — *A Fine Family* and *Days of the Turban* explore the Hindu – Sikh ethos; *The Shadow Lines* restricts itself to the fortunes of Hindu and Muslim Bangla families; *English, August*, and *A Suitable Boy* do have a strong Bangla presence; while *English, August*, constitutes a more
cosmopolitan, a-communal world in the South Indian town of Madna, A Suitable Boy brings within its larger compass almost the whole of North Indian culture, including a strong Muslim presence.

However, the troubled relations between the communities depicted, as well as the strategies they have adopted to assimilate with the concerns of a larger Indian reality, make it imperative to explore them within a larger framework. The polarities of oppressed/oppressing cultures, the demands of majoritarianism/minoritarianism, and the concept of a secular ideology, are useful categories in an inquiry of the methods the various communities adopt to work out their own spaces within the ambit of a nation-state, which seeks to cater to the demands of a multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-religious, non-monolithic, pluralistic society, which both subsumes and nurtures these multiple identities.

4.2.1. The Nation and its Identity

Edward Said, in Culture and Imperialism (1994) has focussed upon the need to advocate a 'complex but not reductively unified' approach to the task of defining a nation, rather than trying to establish a stridently 'unified identity' for it. According to him, it is important to realise that no culture is pure and single; that all cultures are 'hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic' (Said).
1994:xxix). No doubt, as Leela Gandhi points out, the ideology of strident nationalism 'has been an important feature of decolonisation struggles in the third world' (Gandhi 1999:102); it assists in creating a sense of bonding in colonised peoples, which is essential in the arduous task of repelling and eventually overcoming the coloniser. The nation’s identity further gets reinforced by appeals to antiquity and to a ‘supposedly unbroken tradition’ (Said 1994:xxviii), which stresses its uniqueness, its identity and its unitariness. This ideology demands that we ‘venerate our nations and admire our traditions...[and] pursue their interests with toughness and in disregard for other societies’ (ibidum:21). And the warning sounded by Said seems to be borne out by the intolerance, the violence and the bloodshed that the last century has witnessed in newly independent states in the name of nationalism; in the words of Leela Gandhi:

East or West, we are now aware of the xenophobia, racism and loathing which attends the rhetoric of particularism. Nationalism has become the popular pretext for contemporary disquisitions of intolerance.

(Gandhi 1999:108)

Unfortunately, in pluralistic, multi-religious, multi-lingual societies and heterogeneous like India, this intolerance seems to have turned within the nation itself, often posing a serious threat to its very unity and integrity.
4.2.2 Community Identity and Pluralism in the Indian Context

Given the pluralism, heterogeneity and diversity of the Indian ethos, it is not surprising that community identity is a highly volatile and politicised issue. Religions, languages, cultures and interests are often in conflict with each other, each one vying for its own space and value; and yet, the 'unity in diversity' ideology sought to be legitimised in the constitution by giving it a secular framework, has kept in check the disruptive tendencies that lead to frequent conflicts on the grounds of caste, religion and language. The progressive questioning of this secular ideology, however, has replaced the earlier implicit faith in it, and the post-90s have seen an alarming increase in disturbances between the major religious communities. In the past half-century after the independence of India, the divide between the majority Hindu community, which accounts for more than 82% of the population of India, and the minority communities like the Muslims, the Christians, the Sikhs, has reached alarming proportions, as is evident from the long drawn-out Khalistan Movement in the Punjab, the post-1992 conflagrations between the Hindus and Muslims in various parts of the nation and the targeting of Christian missionaries like Graham Staines and his sons in Orissa. These phenomena may be extreme manifestations of the growing divide
between communities; but the fact remains that secularism as a concept is no longer as sacrosanct as it was earlier on believed to be, and that what Walter Benjamin considers the comparative demands of majoritarianism vs minoritarianism need to be subject to greater scrutiny; the concept of secularism, too, needs to be re-examined in the light of the growing demands of each of the component communities.

4.2.3. The Crisis of Secularism

Secularism is among the most important values enshrined in the Constitution of India, finding prime mention in the Preamble itself. But, increasingly, the term has become suspect in the light of the growing demands of the right-wing ideology which feels that in the name of religious equality, the interests of the majority Hindu community have been side-lined and marginalized. They also believe that the appeasement of the minority communities has been a state policy, and that the ‘pseudo-secularists’ have much to answer for in the context of the vigorous and persistent debate on secularism in India today.

The Advanced Learners’ Dictionary defines the term secular as ‘not concerned with spiritual or religious affairs’, and secularism as ‘the belief that laws, education etc. should be based on facts, science etc. rather than religion’. When applied to the policies of the state it implies a
total separation of the religious and the political, since religion is considered as a matter of individual choice rather than one which belongs to the public sphere. In Indian society, where the hold of religion is very strong, and in which the individual is defined within the parameters set up by the concentric systems of family, caste, religion and community, it becomes almost impossible to accept the idea of a policy, which divorces itself from religion in any way. Andre Beteille, the noted contemporary sociologist comments upon the link between the importance of the family and religion within the Indian context to prove that the one reinforces the other:

Religion has always had a central place in the Indian family, whether among Hindus, Muslims or Christians, and the family continues to be a very robust institution in both rural and urban India.

(Beteille 2000:199)

So, secularism in the sense of indifference to religion in any sphere of life or institution becomes immediately suspect. The only sense in which the term can acquire significance in the Indian context is when it is interpreted to mean equal respect for all religions, Gandhiji’s concept of ‘Sarva Dharma Samman’.

Speaking in the context of the freedom struggle, Rajmohan Gandhi states that the only way to attain the goal of freedom was to reconcile the
various communities – religious, linguistic, caste-and-class based – with one another, and that

Given India's attachment to religion, the only realistic goal was to bring Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians together on common platforms; de-Hinduizing the Hindus or de-Islamizing the Muslims was not a practical proposition.

(Gandhi 1999:206)

The need to bring various communities together, therefore, was, and continues to be the prime requirement in forging the Indian nation; M. K. Gandhi, who has often been charged with aggravating communal tensions in India by his predominantly Hindu discourse (his vision of the Indian nation in terms of Ram Rajya) on the one hand, and his alleged appeasement of the Muslims, on the other, however, has repudiated the idea of the one religion-one nation theory in the strongest terms possible:

India cannot cease to be one nation because people belonging to different religions live in it. The introduction of foreigners does not necessarily destroy the nation; they merge in it. A country is one nation only when such a condition obtains in it. That country must have the faculty for assimilation. India has ever been such a country. In reality there are as many religions as there are individuals; but those who are conscious of the spirit of nationality does not interfere with one another's religion. If they do, they are not fit to be considered a nation. If the Hindus believe that India should be peopled only by Hindus, they are living in dreamland. The Hindus, the Mohammedans, the Parsis and the Christians who have made India their country are fellow-countrymen, and they will have to live in unity, if only for their own interest. In no part of the
world are one nationality and one religion synonymous terms; nor has it ever been so in India.

(Gandhi 1998:45)

By and large, it is this secular vision that inheres in the novels of the 1980s. In this chapter, now, the focus will be on the portrayal of the Hindu Community; the next chapter takes up for analysis the concerns of some of the other communities that are part of the nation.

4.3.1. The Depiction of the Hindu Community

The depiction of the Hindu community in these novels seeks to foreground the liberal and assimilative aspects of Hinduism. As one of its leading commentators on the Hindu religion, the philosopher, Dr. Radhakrishnan emphasises,

Hinduism is more a way of life than a form of thought. While it gives absolute liberty in the world of thought, it enjoins a strict code of practice. The theist or atheist, the sceptic and the agnostic may all be Hindus if they accept the Hindu system of culture and life. Hinduism insists not on religious conformity but a spiritual and ethical outlook on life.

(Radhakrishnan 2000:58)

The seven novels located within the Hindu community, too, are products of the same school, and the fact that they are not overtly concerned with community identity reveals the persistence of the vision fostered by the
English-educated classes. In these novels, Hinduism is viewed more as a cultural rather than a religious phenomenon, forming a ‘tapestry of the most variegated tissues and almost endless hues’ (ibidem:8). Instead of a monolithic philosophic or intellectual system, they depict a way of life which flows in a subterranean manner, and which transcends the innumerable diversities of blood, colour, language, dress, manners and sect. An analysis of the philosophic aspects, the depiction of the rituals and ceremonies and of the social structure of the community in the novels reveals a wide range of religio-socio-political aspects of Hinduism, varying from the near-complete valorisation of it in Raj and A Fine Family and Days of the Turban, to mock-ironic representations of it A Suitable Boy and English August, to a deeper, subversive critique in The Shadow Lines and The Great Indian Novel. The Trotternama, more or less, takes a superficial view of the Hindu way of life, the only character representing it, to some extent being the ineffectual, and obviously named Brahmin-scholar at Sans Souci, Sunya.

4.3.1.1. Unquestioned Valorisation: A Fine Family, Days of the Turban and Raj

The subtle, and, often, obvious valorisation of the Hindu community in these three novels, is an indication of the dominance of a
particular value system and life-style, pointing to the desire to homogenise the plurality of India and to subsume it under a singular identity. Stereotyped and token concessions to the multiplicity of communities that exist in the nation are, of course, made as in the facile bonding between the Muslim Prime Minister and the Sirpur princes in Raj, or the depiction of Uday Singh as a naive victim of the Punjab terrorists in Days of the Turban. Still, the Muslim and Sikh communities in both these novels are projected as the 'human' face of what, nevertheless, remains, strictly speaking, 'the other.' But rather than offering a strident hostility to the 'other', they seek to work within the parameters of making the dominant culture attractive, acceptable and hegemonic. The highlighting of the valour of the Muyahil Brahmins by Partap Sharma, the establishment of Sewa Ram and Jaya's mother (the sati mata) as the moral cores of A Fine Family and the Raj respectively, and the elaborate showcasing of the traditions and rituals associated with marriage, death and initiation in all the three novels, effectively cater to the sense of pride associated with belonging to a dominant culture. In this context, Ahmed's concept of 'cultural nationalism', becomes very significant. According to Ahmed

The ideology of cultural nationalism is based explicitly on [a] singularising tendency and lends itself much too easily to parochialism, inverse racism and indigenist obscurantism...[and] the professional petty bourgeoisie's penchant for representing its own cultural practices and
aspirations, virtually by embodying them as so many emblems of a unified national culture.

(Ahmed 1994:8)

'Cultural nationalism' operates as a privileged discourse in these three novels and the cosmopolitan/pluralistic view of the Indian situation is often disrupted by the obvious privileging of the majority view-point.

4.3.1.2. Dharma and Raj Dharma

'Dharma' is a concept central to the Hindu way of life, and it has been defined by Radhakrishnan as 'the ethical code' which 'apart from certain principles, like truth-speaking, non-violence... is relative and dependent upon the conditions of society' (Radhakrishnan 1977:505-506), and refers to 'satya, or the truth of things' (ibidem:59). It is an all-embracing, holistic concept, which covers the personal, social, economic and political aspects of life. Since none of the novels are overtly philosophic in intent, they do not attempt an exposition or critique of this very important concept, but there is a showcasing of it in, particularly, Raj, especially in the context of public life and statecraft. The rulers of Sirpur, even Jaya, are tutored in the art of Rajniti, by the rajguru, and it stands her in good stead during the highly trying times she has to face, as daughter-princess, wife-queen, widow-mother-regent, through the
struggles with the British raj on the one hand and the Indian nationalists on the other, the fears of annexations and the trauma of being coerced into joining the Indian nation in 1947. The words of the rajguru become a refrain at all these strategic moments:

Saam, a king must serve his people's needs, Daan, he must provide for their welfare. Dand, he must punish injustice. Bhed, he must protect the kingdom with treatises and alliances.

(Mehta 1993:275)

So, when the Maharaja of Balmer forces his wife to forego purdah, during the famine, or when he ventures to travel to Russia in order to sell a diamond from the Royal Treasury, or when he sends his son to take part in the world war, he is acting in the interest of the people, following the principles of Saam and Daan. He has to resort to Bhed too, but it is left to Jaya to refine it into a fine art because the upheavals she has to face require much more political manoeuvring than her father. It is she, who, is called upon to rescue her brother-in-law, Prince Victor from the clutches of his scheming mistress, and she has learnt enough bhed to use this opportunity as a bargaining strategy to persuade her husband to appoint her as the regent in case their son has to ascend the throne of Sirpur. No doubt, bhed is akin to Machiavellian doctrines of statecraft, but by stressing the 'dharma' aspect of it Gita Mehta, emphasises the ethical
principles, which a holistic view of life demands; it also points to the strengths and the elasticity of the system.

The value of ‘dharma’ is also highlighted by Das in A Fine Family and, to a large extent, by Seth in A Suitable Boy, by valorising the spartan lifestyle of Sewa Ram and the quiet unobtrusive spirituality of Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor. These are presented as the ‘ideal’ and the exemplary - signalling a hegemonising of the values they represent. However, the concept of ‘dharma’ is problematised and subject to greater critical scrutiny by Shashi Tharoor in The Great Indian Novel, and the subversiveness that imbues Tharoor’s treatment will be taken up for discussion in a later section of this chapter.

4.3.1.3. Householders and Renunciates

A Fine Family carries forward the process of what Ahmed refers to as ‘civilisational singularisation’, in his depiction of the private spheres of life, - the life of the individual and family, and the attempts of the individual to attain liberation or moksha. Conflicting attitudes towards spirituality mark the attitudes and actions of the characters, ranging from the sceptical mindset of the protagonist Bauji, his grandson and spiritual heir, Arjun and Tara, to the simple faith and deep
asceticism of Sewa Ram. Arjun’s stand can be regarded as typically that of the educated-professional class to which he belongs:

‘an excess of religion was partly to blame for the country’s problems: it supported an unjust social structure, it made people obscurantist and fanatical; it allowed them to accept injustices; it turned their minds to their personal salvation and the other world, and prevented them from acting to improve this world.’

(Das 1990:327)

However, it is quite clear that cynics like Arjun have a great deal to learn from the likes of Sewa Ram, and the novel delineates his education towards ‘maturity’.

What is emphasised is that Sewa Ram’s spirituality does not make him a renunciate. His acceptance of the role of the householder is in keeping with the accepted principles of the Hindu way of life; to quote Dr. Radhakrishnan again:

The four stages (of man’s life) of brahmacharya or the period of training, grahstya or the period of work for the world as householder, vanaprasthya or the period of retreat for the loosening of the social bonds and samnasyaya or the period of renunciation and expectant awaiting of freedom indicate that life is a pilgrimage to the eternal life through different stages.

(Radhakrishnan 2000:63)

so, even though he has renounced many of his earthly ties, like the bond with his parents, he remains a productive member of society as an
engineer (partly fulfilling Nehru’s dream of an industrialised India), and carves out a simple life-style for himself, much to the chagrin of his wife Tara, and finds peace in the religiosity and spirituality offered by his guru at the ashram. Marriage, for him, is very much a part of the scheme of things he has adopted; it is ‘not so much a concession to human weakness as a means of spiritual growth… for the sake of the development of personality as well as the continuance of the family ideal.’ (Radhakrishnan 2000:65). Similarly, Arjun’s wife Priti, too, does not renounce her marriage and her home when her spiritual inclinations lead her to the guru’s ashram. And in A Suitable Boy, Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor stands out as the ideal, who integrates the life of the householder with that of the seeker. As pointed out by David Myers

Mrs. Kapoor is symbolically identified with the ‘hassingar tree’... which was stolen from Indra’s heaven by Krishna as a present for his wife Rukmini... [Her] puja-prayers are certainly not ironised... This kind of religious piety is affirmed by Seth because he perceives it as providing the soul of family togetherness and a bulwark of altruism against the selfishness of the material passions.

(Dass 1990:84-85)

So, it is Sewa Ram, Priti and Mrs. Kapoor who emerge as the unobtrusive but definitive icons, who set moral, spiritual, ethical and social standards of family and community.
4.3.1.4. The Guru and the Ashram

Another idea central to the Hindu view of life that finds favour with Das is the important role of the teacher or the guru, who acts as a spiritual guide in the course of life. The prominence of the guru is due to ‘the inability of the human mind to resolve the mystery of the relation of God to the world’ (Radhakrishnan 2000:55). The supreme teacher in the Hindu world-view is Krishna, who guides Arjun on the battlefield of Kurukshetra and interprets the call of duty for him. The guru is a central figure in A Fine Family, who inspires his devotees and seeks to answer some of the questions that trouble them. Tabish Khair (2001) has pointed out that even though the ‘saint’ is a symbol of emotional, social and religious empowerment in India, he is rarely accorded this honour in Indian English Fiction, except in the case of Raju in Narayan’s The Guide (1959). Almost as proof against this stand are the depictions of the Guru in A Fine Family and Ramjap Baba in A Suitable Boy.

The depiction of the guru and his ashram in Das’s novel is not only idealised, it presents an idyllic world, which provides a refuge to its devotees in moments of personal, social and political crisis: it offers Priti real hope when her mind is in tumult, and it shelters its devotees from the mayhem during the partition, apart from being the spiritual home of people like Sewa Ram.
The impact of the ashram and the venerable guru is emphasised by the reaction of the sceptical Bauji, who visits it in order to meet his prospective son-in-law, Sewa Ram.

Sceptical by nature and shy of religion, he was amused to see himself swept away by the guru and the ashram's atmosphere.

(Das 1990:18)

He is touched by the peace, mysticism and tranquillity of the place, and attracted by the awe-inspiring presence of the guru:

The guru, he noted, was six feet tall. He had a flowing, white beard and wore a white turban. He kept smiling at everyone. Bauji was quite taken up by his awesome bearing.

(Das 1990:26)

His teachings regarding the virtues of meditation, a disciplined, ordered life, the need to treat life with detachment, to treat this world as a training place for the next, and the equality of all religions are presented with the kind of authorial intervention and direct comment which mar the narrative, so that it emerges as complacent and unquestioning. By making the sceptical Bauji the spokesperson for the life of the ashram, Das obviously feels that he has succeeded in giving it the necessary objectivity and, hence, legitimacy; he seeks to project the ashram as an alternative social structure or organisation, which is self-sustaining and which can sustain
society in troubled times. The very loud and obvious privileging of the virtues of ashram life, however, serve to make it a uni-dimensional portrayal.

Parallel to the guru in A Fine Family, is Ramjap Baba of A Suitable Boy:

This thin man, as withered as a scarecrow, burned to the colour of dark tanned leather by the sun and the wind, gaunt, exhausted, squatted on the platform, his knees near his ears, his long hair faintly visible over the ledge of the parapet. He had a white beard, matted black hair, and sunken eyes that stared almost sightlessly across the sea of people, as if they were so many grains of sand or drops of water.

(Seth 1993:723)

Das’s guru is a picture of prosperity and orderliness, while Seth’s Baba epitomises the austere; both, however, are familiar portrayals, and it is in these portrayals that one suspects that the novelists are writing for an international audience, giving it the mandatory doses of exotica and the stereotypical ‘Indian’ flavour. Of course, Seth balances and subverts this gratifying picture by that of the more abrasive and cynical Sanaki Baba. The subversion that is intrinsic to the dialectics of A Suitable Boy is evident in Seth’s balancing of the portraits of Ramjap Baba and Sanaki Baba.
4.3.1.5. **Showcasing the Ceremonial and the Ritualistic**

Apart from an intellectual and philosophic core, every community develops and fosters some common rituals, practices and ceremonies which serve to create a sense of bonding among its members; and *Raj, A Fine Family* and *Days of the Turban* offer an almost unabashed celebration of the rituals of marriage, death, rites of initiation, in the process highlighting community identity and reaffirming its value.

The ‘spectacle’ value of the depiction of rituals and ceremonies is obvious in the elaborate, minute descriptions, which, one suspects are worked out for the uninitiated reader - the westernised reader, who, possibly, by virtue of his/her education and cultural alienation needs to be tutored in the ways of ‘Indian’ life. So, Tara’s marriage comes across as vintage exotica – with its elaborations of pre-marriage and marriage ceremonies, which seek to recreate both the festivity and the heartbreak of the occasion: Tara is the unwilling bride, and Sewa Ram, the austere bridegroom, and both of them have to submit to the wishes of Bauji, who, organises the marriage in great splendour, keeping in mind his family’s social standing. For sheer ostentatiousness, there is nothing to match the portrayal of Jaya’s marriage in *Raj*.

Jaya moved slowly to the screen. Scores of Sirpur dancing girls were winding into the marriage courtyard, tossing showers of coins onto the yellow flagstones as they danced.
The approaching elephants, lit by the bronze torches that lined the ramparts, threw huge shadows against the battlements of the Forts.

(Mehta 1993:170)

Similarly, in A Fine Family, Das is at great pains to explain the significance of each of the rituals and, even translates the Sanskrit marriage vows for the benefit not only of the bride and the bridegroom, but, one suspects, even for the reader:

‘I hold your hand for your happiness. May we both live to a ripe old age. You are the queen and shall rule over my home. I am the heaven, you are the earth. Let us marry and be joined together. Your heart I take in mine. Our minds shall be one. May God make us one.’

(Das 1990:91)

This ritualistic re-iteration serves to highlight the solemnity of the occasion, - rendered even more grave by the fact that both these marriages take place under the shadow of death, - the deaths of Jaya’s father and brother in Raj and the communal killing of a neighbour in A Fine Family, respectively.

In keeping with the extravagant portrayal of marriages, rituals related with death are also presented with orientalist overtones in Raj. The actual death rituals are not reported first-hand, but the public spectacle which proclaims the Maharani of Balmer a widow is detailed with vicarious relish:
She knelt and removed her diamond anklets, throwing them on the floor under the bed. She loosed her long hair from its thick plait and unfastened the jewelled collar of matrimony that had enclosed her neck since she had become a bride at the age of thirteen... with slow deliberation [she] rubbed the red tilak of marriage off her forehead...

...When Jaya brought the scissors, the Maharani lifted handfuls of heavy hair and cut it off close to the scalp, until the floor around her was carpeted with her hair.

(Mehta 1993:157)

Further,

A slab of rough stone was pushed into the Maharani’s path...[she] dropped to her knees. Jaya saw her mother raise both the wrists and smash them against the stone until broken glass bangles splintered the rough surface.

(Mehta 1993:159)

It is almost like a public stripping of the Maharani - a stripping of her position, her rank, her roles, - her very identity. As Raja Man Singh proclaims, once again, in public,

‘She has neither husband nor son to keep her in her old age. What shall we give the widow?’

(ibedum:162)

the ‘widowing’ of Jaya herself is presented as equally painful, though, in keeping with her public duties as Regent, her shaven head adds a kind of glamour in a more westernised set up.
In *Days of the Turban*, the showcasing of rituals takes on more dramatic overtones and the visual effects are calculated to cater to the taste of the reader for the macabre and the esoteric, as in the following account of the rites of initiation of a youngster into the muyihal community:

‘Initiation?’ he roared ‘You youngsters don’t know what it means. To you now it is just symbolic. In my days you had to prepare for it. Like others learnt scriptures, we learnt how to use a weapon... The test was simple. While the priest said two holy words – ‘Om Shanti you had to make three strokes. Like this.’ He turned to the priest.

‘Say the words.’

The priest began to intone the two words.

In one swift movement, Lok Raj unsheathed the sword. It glinted in the overhead sun but already in a continuous motion it was swishing down in an arc, cutting through the rope at the stake and upward again slicing through the lamb’s neck. Even as the severed head was falling and the animal remained standing, the tip of the sword jabbed into its trunk and raised the body aloft. Only now did the blood began to spurt from the jugular.

(Sharma 1986:285)

The texture of this passage is in keeping with the larger episodes that the novel delineates, - the killing of the terrorist Uday Singh and the present of his severed head to the Ahluwalia family, the burning of an entire village, the rescue of Balbir from the Golden Temple and the resulting bloodshed.

All these sensational events are used by the author to establish the virility of the race and to valorise the pride of race and community that Lok Raj carries in his blood. What makes the novel frighteningly pro-
establishment is that there is no subversive questioning of these regressive practices; it is almost a celebration of the singularity and the insularity of the culture that Sharma depicts. The danger of this kind of representation is highlighted by Ahmed. It lends itself to

parochialism, inverse racism and indigenist obscurantism, not to speak of the petty bourgeoisie’s penchant for representing its own cultural practices and aspirations, virtually by embodying them as so many emblems of a unified national culture.

(Ahmed 1994:8)

It is not surprising, therefore, that Sharma, wholeheartedly endorses the actions of Indira Gandhi in ordering ‘Operation Bluestar’ in order to flush out the terrorists from the Golden Temple, as representing the national good.

4.3.1.6. The Muhiyal Brahmins

The representation of a community as a miniature nation is worked out in Days of the Turban in the portrayal of the Muhiyal Brahmins, the warrior Brahmin race of the Punjab; in this novel ‘nationalism or the marga cultural features merge with the local or desi cultural features’ (Devy 1995:17). Sharma presents the muhiyals as having the right combination of intellectual vigour and physical prowess. As landlord-farmers, the Chibber family is a force to reckon with in the village; Lok
Raj, the patriarch, possesses almost unearthly commonsense and his healthy scepticism is responsible for the balance between tradition and modernity which is so necessary for the progress of a nation. The international reach of the community is obvious in the exploits of Raskaan, the financial and entrepreneurial wizard whose success story in Germany is seen as a highpoint in the annals of the history of the family and the community. Similarly, Satyavan, the intellectual of the family, moves in international circles and is involved in matters of national importance; it is no wonder that these two people emerge as role-models for the intelligent, but confused protagonist, Balbir.

At a crucial point in the novel, Balbir proclaims his identity as being a Panjabi, a pandit, a muhiyal, a Chibber. And, in keeping with the concept of multiculturalism, Sharma informs the reader that the community cuts across religious barriers and the Muhiyals may be Hindu, Muslim or Sikh by religion. The novelist documents their way of life by quoting extensively from T.P. Russel Stacey's *The History of the Muhiyals, the Militant Brahman Race of India*, often interspersing the narrative with authorial comments about the Chibber family as representative of the race:

Though they were Brahmins by caste, as are all Muhiyals, they behaved primarily as Muhiyals and did not see themselves as twice-born and twice-virtuous: they were farmers and
fighters and had no use for the scriptural begging bowl and merely tolerated all rites and ceremonies. They were as fierce and as ignorant as the next and did not pretend to be otherwise.

(Sharma 1986:07)

From the claims of multiculturalism, it is easy to make a leap to the idea of the nation and make the community stand for it:

This was an Indian weakness – the head is ruled by the heart and the heart belongs to the family, and the family extends through caste-bound kinships;

(ibedum:306)

the Muhiyal weakness for caste-bound relationships is seen as pan-Indian; add to this the given antiquity of the race and its pre-colonial history going as far back as the 14th century, which Sharma invokes, and the establishment of the ‘national’ credentials of the community is complete; not in terms of its geographical spread all over India, but in terms of the uniformity with the ideological ethos and culture of the nation.

4.3.2. Mock-Ironic Representations: English, August and A Suitable Boy

After the complete and undisguised valorisation of the Hindu community in Raj, Days of the Turban and A Fine Family, and the
equation of the community ethos with the national ethos, the fissures that exist in this nationalistic discourse make themselves felt in the subversions of English, August and the scrutinising of a variety of stances in A Suitable Boy. Thus, in Chatterjee’s novel, the irreverent play on the name Agastya, points to the rejection of traditional roles and concepts, especially in the minds of the upper class, westernised youth; so, from evoking the legend of the sage Agastya, its Anglicisation in the name ‘August’ to the various meaningless, erratic and sporadic interpretations that the protagonist gives it as and when it suits him, the novel seeks to subvert the very notion of all that is accepted as tradition and convention. However, the subversion is kept within the bounds of humour and mild satire; it does not become a powerful indictment either of the traditional or of the subversion itself; all it seeks to achieve is mild amusement at the confusions of a pseudo-angst-ridden young man, who is simply trying to find his focus. Even the Bhagwad Gita that Agastya carries with him is just a part of the paraphernalia – the Confessions of Saint Augustine, the drugs, the booze, the conversations and other inanities, which are used by him to overcome boredom.

The broad, sweeping scope of A Suitable Boy, makes it possible for the novelist to create ‘the impression of a large national community’ (Singh 1993:164), taking into consideration multiple religious, class,
familial and professional concerns. Further, Seth is also able to voice this multiplicity through differing angles, and to try to seek a balance between them. The colonial binaries pointed out by Partha Chatterjee (1996), between modernity and tradition, backwardness and progress, the alleged inferiority of colonised India and its rich cultural heritage, work in this novel to create a kind of unresolved dialectic between the critique of the Hindu way of life. This is obvious in the authorial snide comments on the beliefs of a Rupa Mehra, and the scepticism of Mahesh Kapoor on the one hand, and the projection of the spiritual values of Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor as the moral core, which sustains family, community and nation.

4.3.3 The Philosophy of Everyday Life

The Hindu way of life embraces both the public and the private spheres of life, and its code of conduct applies to personal relationships, family ties, the social structure and the political and economic spheres of activity. As already discussed with reference to Raj and A Fine Family, the individual's quest for liberation or moksha takes place within the spheres of family and community, with the active assistance of a spiritual guide or a guru. A Suitable Boy reinforces this concept, and Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor is foregrounded as the ideal wife, mother, nurturer; it is in the fulfilment of these roles that she attains her moksha. Her Hindu-ness is
the fortification on which her spiritual role is based and as David Myers (Dass 1990) has pointed out this placing of her within the Hindu ethos is worked out both overtly as well as symbolically, by identifying her with the hassinger tree. So, the ‘householder’, Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor becomes a source of strength in times of crisis for the family; even in her death, she fulfils her role as redeemer and nurturer of the family: her death is a kind of penance for the aberrations of her younger son Maan and the scepticism of her husband, and it enhances the sobriety and dignity of her character.

Her apotheosis begins with the prophecy of her death by the holy Ramjap Baba, and symbols of purity abound in the description of her funeral, which is a simple, sober affair and remains untouched by the satiric comments of the author. No doubt is left of the fact that the unbeliever, Mahesh Kapoor is spiritually redeemed by the death of his wife:

She had dispersed. She was the garden at Prem Niwas... she was Veena’s love for music, Pran’s asthma, Maan’s generosity, the survival of some refugees four years ago, the neem trees that would preserve quilt stored in the zinc trunks of Prem Niwas, the moulting feather of some pond heron, a small, unrung brass bell, the memory of decency in an indecent time, the temperament of Bhaskar’s great grand-children.

(Seth 1993:1220)
As a contrast to this near-apotheosis, is Seth’s ironic, gently mocking picture of the confused beliefs of Mrs. Rupa Mehra about a seminal article of faith among the Hindus - rebirth:

Her nose began to redden at the thought of her husband, who would, she felt certain, be partaking of their present joy from somewhere benevolently above. Mrs. Rupa Mehra believed, of course, in reincarnation, but at moments of exceptional sentiment, she imagined that the late Raghuvir Mehra still inhabited the form in which she had known him when he was alive.

(Seth 1993:3)

Of course, this is labouring the point too much, and is meant to be an indictment of the half-baked belief system of the class of Macaulayised Indians; but, Rupa Mehra is obviously meant to be regarded as a foil to Mrs. Kapoor; further, it also gives Seth an opportunity to demonstrate the openness of a system, or ideology, which accommodates both Rupa Mehra’s belief and non-belief in the idea of rebirth.

Similarly, the belief in godmen and gurus, which A Fine Family hegemonises, and which is reinforced in the portrayal of Ramjap Baba in A Suitable Boy, receives a rude jolt in his depiction of the ubiquitous and appropriately named Sanaki Baba. Sanaki Baba is delineated as a man of the world, capable of handling people with clever finesse, offering, instead of real alternatives, incantations, smart gestures and smooth talk. It is significant that Seth does not make him deliver a single sermon, - that job
is left to his younger disciples; power politics is the norm at his ephemeral ashram, as is obvious in the resentment one of the pilgrims feels at the importance given to a disciple, Pushpa. Seth speaks, ironically, of her discomfort in answering a question put to her which was asked in the first place, to ‘show up both her ignorance and her pretensions’ (Seth 1993:727), and of Sanaki Baba’s obvious relish at her predicament. When she viciously hits back at the questioner, the hatred and power that imbues such ‘holy’ places is revealed not only to Dipankar, who has come in search of answers to the ashram, but also to the reader:

It was all so unloving, possessive and defensive that Dipankar could hardly stand it. The violent revulsion he was feeling he was undergoing made him see this beautiful woman in a completely different light. She was gloating over her rival’s discomfiture in a way that made him almost sick.

(Seth 1993:728)

Thus, instead of the unabashed glorification of the cult of the godmen, as in A Fine Family, Seth tries to offer a critique of it as well, and a more balanced and ‘fair’ picture. The tradition/modernity binary is seen at play here; it is further made complex by making Sanaki Baba an uncannily practical man, who is capable of stark honesty when the need arises. After the horrible tragedy at the Pul Mela, Dipankar points to the huge funeral pyres where the victims are being cremated, and asks him, ‘‘Baba, how do you explain all this? is it all the lila of the universe, the play of God?’’
Baba grimly and blandly replies, "...I think there was a flaw in the administrative arrangements" (Seth 1993:748-749).

It is this critiquing of the accepted norms of the community that makes *A Suitable Boy* a far more complex work than the self-congratulatory *A Fine Family*, or the near-oriental *Raj*, or the unmitigated, sceptical *English, August*.

4.3.4. **Attitude towards Rituals and Ceremonies**

Seth maintains a similar dialectical tension in his depiction of rituals and ceremonies, both showcasing them and offering a critical stance. A comparison between the two marriages that open and conclude the novel is instructive, because, by the end of the magnum opus, Seth, too, like Lata, has arrived at a certain acceptance of the formalities related with public events in Hindu culture. The tone of irony and satire that marks the Savita-Pran marriage, viewed largely through the perspective of the rebellious Lata, gives way to total conformity and acceptance at the time of her own marriage; in this way, Seth has managed to present both the insider and outsider perspectives of the ceremonies. In the Savita-Pran marriage, Seth’s focus is on its social rather than its ritualistic aspects. The entire ceremony is presented through the perspective of sceptics like Maan and Lata, and hence laced with mild censure. For the guests, the
priority at the marriage is socialising, and only a few close relatives are witness to the actual ceremony:

The crowd paid no great attention to the actual wedding rites. These would go on for the better part of an hour, while the guests mulled and chatted round the lawns of Prem Niwas.

(Seth 1993:14)

in contrast, at Lata’s own marriage,

The guests, unusually for a wedding, were quiet and attentive as the priest went through the rites.

(Seth 1993:1337)

At Savita’s wedding, the priests are not spared either, and the ceremony itself is criticised, rather bitterly,

The two bare-chested priests, one very fat and one fairly thin, both apparently immune to the cold, were locked in a mild insistent competition as to who knew a more elaborate form of the service...seven living people, sitting round a fire intoning a dead language that only three of them understand.

(ibedum:14-15)

it is only at her own wedding that the sobriety and the dignity of the ceremony dawns on Lata, and this solemnity marks a dramatic shift in the novel, towards a total acceptance:

Her brothers poured puffed rice onto her hands and into the fire each time she and Haresh circled it. The knot between their scarves was tied, and bright, red sindoor was applied to the
parting of Lata’s hair with the gold ring that Haresh was to give her.

(Seth 1993:1338)

Seth also highlights deviations from the accepted norms in these two marriages, as an indication of the ‘modernisation’ of the community: unlike the Maharani in *Raj*, who, when widowed, is exiled, and has no role to play in her daughter’s marriage, Mrs. Rupa Mehra, actually performs the ‘kanyadaan’ ceremony. She may not dress in the rich patola saree, but she need not don the traditional garb of the widow either; breaking convention, Savita’s marriage takes place in the bridegroom’s house, and Mrs. Mehra insists on a civil marriage for Lata, along with the Arya Samaj ritualistic one, to ‘protect her daughter from the injustices of the traditional Hindu law.’ (Seth 1993:1335) the underlying message seems to be that change takes place, perhaps subtly, but inevitable, and tradition is modified by the winds of change.

As a contrast to the stark depiction of the rituals associated with widowhood in *Raj*, Seth offers a soothing picture of the dignity of the ‘suhagan’ being prepared for her funeral pyre:

She was dressed in red, as she had been at her wedding, many years ago, and there was sindoor in the parting of her hair. Incense was burning in a bowl at her feet.

(Seth 1993:1219)
even though Seth cannot resist a sardonic authorial comment on the state of mind of Mahesh Kapoor, his usual ironic tone is slightly less harsh:

Her husband performed all the necessary rituals under the guidance of a pundit. What the rationalist in him thought of all the ghee and sandalwood and swahas and the demands of the doms who worked at the pyre was not betrayed by his face.

(ibedum:1220)

the impressive gathering at her Chautha ceremony, however, tell their own tale, and, by symbolically relating her death to the death of Mahatma Gandhi and the ideals he stood for (1225), the spiritual vigour of her beliefs and life is reinforced.

4.4.1. Subversiveness: The Great Indian Novel and Shadow Lines

Post-modernist subversiveness is evident in the very structure of The Great Indian Novel, which is a parodic reworking of the Mahabharata, - one of the two great epics of India. However, in contrast to the Ramayana, which is a religious epic and which lays down the code for moral and model human behaviour, the Mahabharata is a secular epic, which explores the exigencies and compulsions of day-to-day living and offers pragmatic ideas for their resolution. Hence, by subjecting the epic to mock-heroic treatment and drawing irreverent, satiric and ironic parallels between the events in the Mahabharata and modern Indian
history, the novelist reinvents the text for the modern reader, and, in the process, presents a reinterpretation not only of recent Indian history but also of the great epic and its primary preoccupation with eternal values. This involves, no doubt, a rediscovery of an ancient text, which has been lost to the Macaulaysed Indian – and gives it centre-space in the culture of the community. In *The Shadow Lines*, where no community concerns are overtly analysed, the subversiveness arises in the very characterisation of the iconoclastic Tridib, who breaks all norms of family and community living, but who sacrifices his life to restore sanity in a communal riot; ironically, his death, too, emerges as meaningless, since it makes the Grandmother more strident in her hatred for the ‘other’ community. Ghosh’s exploration of the tradition vs modernity debate is not spelt out in obvious terms, but the uneasy equations between the Grandmother and Tridib, the Grandmother and the narrator, the narrator’s mother and the Grandmother, bring it into sharp focus.

4.4.2. **Dharma in The Great Indian Novel**

The concept of Dharma in Hindu philosophy is not very different from that expounded by Tharoor in *The Great Indian Novel*. It is ‘the ethical code’, which, ‘apart from general principles like truth-speaking, and non-violence... *is relative and dependent on the conditions of society*’
(emphasis added) (Radakrishnan 1977:505-506), and focuses on 'right action... satya, or the truth of things' (ibedum:59). The flexibility of this concept is also, what Tharoor seeks to drive home, especially at a time when revivalist tendencies and near-unitary conceptions of nationhood are sending the nation to the edge of disaster:

No more certitudes... Let each man live by his own code of conduct, so long as he has one. Derive your standards from the world around you and not from a heritage whose relevance must be constantly tested. Reject equally the sterility of ideologies and the passionate prescriptions of those who think themselves infallible. Uphold decency, worship humanity, affirm the basic values of our people, - those which do not change – and leave the rest alone. Admit that there is more than one Right, more than one Dharma...

(Tharoor 1989:418)

and, again

India is eternal... but the dharma appropriate for it at different stages of its evolution has varied... if there is one thing that is true today, it is that there are no classical verities valid for all time.

(ibedum:418)

so, even though Gangaji, representing the venerable Bhishma and Mahatma Gandhi, or Dhritarashtra, the blind visionary, symbolising the role of Jawaharlal Nehru, or Pandu as Subhash Chandra Bose are subject to ridicule, and the exploits of Priya Duryodhani (Indira Gandhi) evoke a deep cynicism, the final message of the novel is a positive one, focussing
on the need to rally around the concept of a multi-cultural, pluralistic
society and seek salvation in the richness and the traditions of tolerance
and acceptance of this culture.

Tharoor presents a direct questioning of the role of dharma, too,
when Yudhishtira complains about the futility of his good conduct:

‘What purpose has it served? Has my righteousness helped
either me, my wife, my family or my country? Does justice
prevail in India, or in its history? What has adherence to
dharna achieved in our own story?’

(Tharoor 1989:417)

But the author is quick to legitimise the role of dharma

‘If there is one great Indian principle that has been handed
down through the ages, it is that of the paramount importance
of practising dharma at any price. Life itself is worthless
without dharma. Only dharma is eternal.’

(ibedum:417)

However, the flexibility associated with the concept of dharma, may result
in extreme opportunism as in the Machiavellian advice given by Kanika to
Dhritarashtra that the ruler uses ‘stealth and discretion’ in exercising his
power, does not trust anyone – including kith, kin and friends and takes
care to eliminate rivals unscrupulously (ibedum:271-272). It sometimes
degenerates into crude melodrama and exaggeration as in Priya
Durdhoyani’s attempt to poison the five Pandavas, or when, obeying the
advice of Krishna, Arjun pursues ‘Subhadra’ and lands in the orgiastic embrace of a prostitute.

But, the final message of The Great Indian Novel is a plea for sanity and for the need to take up cudgels on behalf of dharma.

4.4.3. Legends and Mythologies

Tharoor’s agony at the post-independence scenario in India is reflected in the subversive manner in which he adapts the narratives of The Mahabharata, imbuing them with a sense of the ironic and the mock-heroic. The parallels with the epic are obvious as in the portrayal of Gangaji as Gandhi/Bhishma, Dhritharashtra as Nehru, Priya Duryodhani as the evil-minded Duryodhana/Indira Gandhi, Pandu as Subhash Chandra Bose, Vidur as the ‘iron man’ Sardar Patel; thus, events like the vow of celibacy taken by Gangaji reverberate with both tragic and comic overtones, and the voluntary ‘blinding’ of Gandhari is seen with all the sinister implications that go with it. The author’s bitterness comes to the forefront in the retelling of the story of the outcaste Eklavya; the yoking of history with legend betrays a deep cynicism, especially as it is shown to have a frightening relevance to the present situation. In this study, we shall focus only upon two such depictions to explore the strategies employed by
Tharoor in mixing legend with colonial history: (i) the role of Krishna and (ii) the disrobing of Draupadi.

4.4.3.1. The Role of Krishna

In The Mahabharata, Krishna is the supreme deity, an incarnation of Vishnu, a spiritual teacher, the exponent of the Bhagavad Gita, ‘the spokesman of the highest religion and philosophy’ (Radhakrishnan 1977:496), and the repository of right conduct and dharma. In The Great Indian Novel, his stature is diminished and he is presented as something of a local hero, whose activities are restricted mainly to ‘the obscure town of Gokurnam’ one who does not choose to play a major role on the national front. Still, he remains the embodiment of the nation; he himself is conscious of his all-pervading presence, which he reveals in the moment of crisis to Arjuna:

I am the hills and the mountains, Himalaya – Vindhya;
I am the worship, the sacrifice, the ritual oblation;
I am the priest, the sloka, the rhythmic chant;
The do and the don’t, the can and the can’t;
I am the ghee poured into the fire, I am indeed the fire;
I am the act of pouring, I am the sacred pyre.
I am the beginning and the end;
The aimer and the goal;
The origin, the part and the whole,
The bender and the bend.
I am lover, husband, father, son, Being and non-Being:
I am nation, country, mother, eye. Seeing and All-seeing.

(Tharoor 1989:397-98)

Yet, in spite of this obvious attempt at the deification of Krishna, in spite of his many charms, his agile dance, his grace, his flute music, his profound simplicity, Krishna, in Tharoor’s novel remains a mere interlude, - his one positive act being the sermon to Arjuna, in which the philosophy of *nishkamakarma* is expounded to goad the Pandava prince to defeat Priya Duryodhani in the elections:

So, Arjun, abandon all hesitation.
This is not a cause you can shrink.
You can do just two things for the nation.
Meditate, or take up good work.
In our classics, it is clearly inscribed:
‘Arjun, do thy duty prescribed.’
Dutiful action, without care of reward
Is the first step you can take toward
Eternal bliss: for what you do
Others will imitate; and thus uplift
Your cause, yourself, and your great gift
For initiating action in others, too.
Look at me: there’s nothing I need to attain
Yet, I act, and inspire this election campaign.

(Tharoor 1989:396-97)

But Krishna is a failure, too, in this novel. After the defeat of Priya Duryodhani in the elections, he goes back to his southern district, just as he had retired to Dwarka in the epic after the war. He does not become a part of re-building. It is this ‘desertion’ of Krishna, the abdication of his
responsibility that punctures the godhead image of Krishna. The novelist's deep sense of anguish and being betrayed stem from this desertion of the deity: betrayal by a person, who, if only he had taken matters in hand could have arrested the downslide of the nation into its present state of chaos:

He could have prevented all this, but he chose not to act. He remained content with his little fief, giving advice and verse to Arjun, and then went back to his comforts and allowed all this to happen. India has too many Krishnas. His brilliance burnt itself out without illuminating the country.

(ibidem:414)

This is severe, scathing indictment; Krishna, thus becomes a symbol of the sterile, arm-chair intelligentsia of the nation, the educated non-actors who in their own selfish interests stay away from what they regard as the cesspool of public life, leaving a vacuum in places of governance and policy-making. Krishna's inaction holds a mirror to the inaction of the millions of Indians who refuse to become part of the struggles of the nation. One way of overcoming this negative portrayal is to remember that Krishna, in the Mahabharata, is regarded as an unmoved mover, one who guides the chariot of Arjuna, one who inspires him, but also the one who leaves the action to him. The implication of this stance can be that it
is the people and the institutions of India that have to get their act together; the gods are to be seen as inspirations only.

4.4.3.2. The Disrobing of Draupadi

The disrobing of Draupadi is among the most painful episodes depicted in *The Mahabharata*; after being lost by her five husbands in a rigged game of dice, Draupadi is dragged into court and ‘dishonoured’ by one of the Kauravas, Dushashana; the whole court, including the staunchly righteous Bhishma, watches helplessly, until Krishna comes to her rescue. This deeply resonant incident, which simultaneously represents the plight of women, the role played by guile and deceit in matters of governance, the misuse of both dharma and the principles of righteousness, the helplessness of the upright and the honourable in the face of wickedness and treachery, - also retains its multiple implications and becomes a central symbol in *The Great Indian Novel*, too.

In the mock-ironic world of *The Great Indian Novel*, Draupadi represents Indian democracy, which is threatened by the machinations of Priya Duryodhani; the stripping of Draupadi Mokrasi stands for the ‘stripping (of) the nation of the values and institutions’ (ibidum:383) that ought to nurture her growth. The entire episode is enacted in the form of a dream, thus underlining its nightmarish quality. In true epic tradition, the
game of dice is depicted in grand style, nature, too contributing its own special effects to the scene. The entire shameful game is planned and executed by Shakuni and Duryodhani; while Yudhishtra, ever conscious of his 'duty' and 'honour' accepts a challenge that he is bound to lose. He wagers and loses all that is dear to him, - his palace, position, his share in the Kaurava kingdom, - in his individual capacity. He then goes on to wager public institutions like the constitution, the laws and the peace of his people. Next come his own freedom and the freedom of his brothers, - the pillars of Indian democracy, the judiciary, the executive, the legislatures, the press and the defence forces; finally, he loses Draupadi, who has been sanctified as 'the flame of a brass lamp in a sacred temple of the people' (Tharoor 1989:309). The disrobing of Draupadi stands for the dishonouring of Indian democracy — in the form of the Emergency (the Siege in the novel). This honour can be restored only by the battle of Kurukhsetra which the elections of 1977 represent. The parable symbolises the total loss of freedom and civil rights suffered by India during this period, reinforced by the 13-year exile of the Pandavas, which, mercifully, lasts for a period of only about two years in the modern Indian context. At the end of these two years, Priya Duryodhani is a spent force, having lost the second game of dice — the elections after the Emergency. The final indictment of Duryodhani comes from Krishna, who, as in the
epic, comes to Draupadi's aid and salvages her honour. Again, it is Krishna, who voices the strongest conviction that in spite of all the chaos and disintegration, the resurgent spirit of India will triumph and survive:

However hard you try, Priya Duryodhani, ... you and your men will never succeed in stripping Draupadi Mokrasi completely. In our country, she will always have enough to maintain her self-respect.

(ibedum:382)

Finally, the Draupadi legend is also used to re-emphasise the Indian nature of our democracy; perhaps Tharoor descends into bathos and becomes over-sentimental in this attempt, but it also affirms the vitality of the Indian precept and practice of the democratic experiment:

No, Ganapathy. Draupadi was Indian; she was ours, and she had to wear a sari. We could not place her in universal beauty contests to be judged as her occidental sisters were, by the shape of her legs or the cut of her costume. If she had been like the others, if she had been wearing the skirts or dresses or even the trousers of Western democratic women, she might have been far more easily disrobed.

(ibedum:385)

The pain, the helplessness, the humiliation, the resilience, the resurgence and the triumph inherent in the Draupadi story, - all are thus brilliantly metamorphosed into the story of the young Indian nation.

Perhaps, Tharoor is not always as successful in infusing metaphoric overtones consistently in all the parallels he works out; thus,
the stupendous contribution of Sardar Patel in persuading Maharajah Hari Singh of Kashmir (Manimir in The Great Indian Novel) to join the Indian Union – is reduced to sheer ribaldry, paralleled in its crassness only by the Krishna-Subhadra-Arjun episode. Maybe all the heroes and gods – Krishna, Bhishma, Yudhishter, Dhritarashtra, Arjun – are consistently cut to size by the insistent use of the ironic tone, and relentlessly satiric import of the narrative; but the final ‘message’ is a plea for sanity and the need to take up cudgels on behalf of Dharma and the democratic spirit. Tharoor claims that he has achieved this by working within the Indian tradition, a tradition in which even our gods have feet of clay, where our great heroes are described in language as people with lusts and cares, who are capable of treachery and deceit, are capable of wagering their wives in a game of dice.

(Tharoor 1989:8)

4.5. Social Hierarchies: The Caste System

‘... without caste there is no Hindu.’ (Weber)

In an important talk delivered in 1957, entitled ‘Caste in Modern India’ M.N. Srinivas (1985:15-41) drew attention to the continuing importance of caste in Indian public life; while the debate on the importance accorded to the caste factor is an on-going one, the diametrically opposing attitudes of the colonists and the nationalists
towards it serve to crystallise the two positions: as Andre Beteille points out, the colonists believed that 'caste was not only the pre-eminent institution of India, but... it permeated every area of life,' and the nationalists held that 'the importance of caste had been greatly exaggerated by the colonial administration' (Fuller 1993:154). But as Srinivas maintains:

For nearly three millennia caste has dominated the lives of the inhabitants of the Indian sub-continent, influencing, if not determining their choice of occupation, diet and spouse, their collective rank in relation to other caste groups, and numerous other matters.

(Srinivas 1985:121)

Srivinas' analysis gains greater credibility with the fact that as far back as 1957, he had rightly anticipated the mandalisation of Indian politics of the early 1990s, and the resurgence of caste concerns not so much in the religious context but in the political arena. Again, Beteille clearly states that 'whatever place religion may have had in it in the past, the future of caste lay not with religion but with politics' (Fuller 1993:159). It is this linking of caste with the political agenda of the nation that novels like A Suitable Boy and Days of the Turban highlight. Through the process of sanskritisation, the caste system does not remain restricted to the Hindu community; it becomes an integral part of the lives of other Indian communities too. The rigidity associated with the caste system, too, has
been lost, and now, among the elite, professional classes caste does not seem to dictate the choice of a profession or a particular life-style. Caste, more often appears to be at the root of social and political conflict, more related with concerns of purity and identity rather than as a force of social discrimination. The broad features of the caste system, outlined by Ghurye (1932) – the segmental division of society, its hierarchy, its restrictions on feeding and social intercourse, the civil and religious disabilities and privileges of the different sections, its emphasis on lack of unrestricted choice of occupation and its restrictions on marriage – therefore call for a reassessment in the light of class and political considerations in post-independent India.

4.5.1. The Upper Caste Predilection of the Novels

The Indian English novels of the 1980s are a product of and an exploration of the upper-caste, upper-class milieu, and hence caste considerations do not overtly figure in them except in the case of the obviously feudal Days of the Turban and, to some extent A Suitable Boy. However, all the novels are set within the upper-caste Brahmin, Kshatriya, Khatri/Kasyasta communities of North India. A telling comment is the near-total absence of the lower castes in the novels, except in the case of the chamar community in A Suitable Boy and Days of the
Turban and the ‘outcaste’ tribals in English, August, pointing to the total segregation of the castes in community life. Further, the lower castes in all these novels have been described ‘from an upper-caste perspective’, echoing the ‘“simple Black” of earlier Euro-American fiction’, characterised by ‘a certain affinity to nature, a simplified lifestyle, a limited understanding, an absolute trust in his “betters”... and, explicitly or by inference, an overwhelming degree of indoctrination into the dominant socio-political culture...’ (Khair 2001:136-137)

In, A Fine Family, for example, Andre Beteille’s observation that ‘the burden of caste may weigh more heavily on the lower than on the upper caste person,’ (Fuller 1993:177) is borne out by the single encounter with the lower caste sweeper woman, who is seduced by the respectable Bauji. The casualness with which this event is referred to in passing shows that from the point of view of the upper castes and classes, it is something routine and perfectly acceptable as long as it does not have any social repercussions as in Days of the Turban. So, instead of highlighting the vulnerability of the victim on grounds of gender, caste and class, Das mentions it with just a hint of the ‘normality’ of such an occurrence within this social set-up.
4.5.2. Caste Purity and Marriage

The ambivalent attitude of the professional classes to caste may lead an individual 'to deny any significance to [it] at one time and to give it exaggerated importance at another' (Fuller 1993:153). One such area where it retains its paramount status is marriage. As Beteille says

> no matter how loudly Hindus might proclaim their indifference or even hostility to caste, when it comes to marriage, all of them – educated and uneducated, urban and rural, professional and peasant – turn to caste.

(ibidem:162)

Most of the marriages that take place in the novels are arranged within familial and caste regulations – Tara-Sewa Ram, Arjun-Priti in A Fine Family, Jaya-Vijay Singh in Raj, Savita-Pran in A Suitable Boy, and it is clear that a proper match for Agastya Sen in English, August, will be one from his own caste. The few inter-caste/inter-community marriages like Ila-Nick Price in The Shadow Lines and Meenakshi-Arun in A Suitable Boy are disastrous. For, as Mrs. Rupa Mehra rationalises while insisting on a 'proper' match for Lata and Varun, 'one’s own community creates a sense of comfort, (Seth 1993:548).

Questions regarding caste purity are voiced in the case of Haresh, the 'suitable' boy for Lata in Seth’s novel. He is a proper enough Khatri to win the approval of Mrs. Rupa Mehra, but the fact that he works in a
shoe factory is seen as a taint. C J Fuller explores this aspect of the novel in his extended introduction in *Caste Today* (1993). Haresh is impure because he works with leather, and there are a number of people, like his uncle, who believe that he has become polluted and has ‘lost caste by working with leather’ (Seth 1993:577). By implication, he is identified with the chamars, because, in ‘North India shoemakers are all Chamars or Jatavs, members of the large Harijan caste that classically epitomises untouchability’ (Fuller 1993:28). This is a very significant aspect of the novel, because it reveals that ‘an implied reference to caste may really signify new distinctions in class’ (Arun) and ‘in another traditional ideas about pollution force themselves to the surface’ (Ibedum:28). Thus, ‘intersubjective meanings’ are more important than objective criteria, and everywhere today there plainly are people like Lata and Haresh, who consciously reject the values of caste and yet find that they react viscerally to pollution and remain sensitive to any suggestion that they are actually tainted by it.

(ibedum:28)

These ‘half-hierarchical, half-substantiative notions of caste’ represented by the likes of Rupa Mehra, Fuller maintains are representative of most Indians today. The fact that Lata does get married to Haresh, however, proves the resilience, the flexibility and the ambivalence with which caste is viewed in post-independent India.
4.5.3. The Lower Castes and Caste Conflict

Caste pollution is a central theme explored in *A Suitable Boy*, and caste conflict leading to violence and mass slaughter exposes the vulnerable flexibility of the system in *Days of the Turban*. Even in *English, August*, the character mischievously named Mohandas Gandhi, who transgresses caste and community boundaries by getting sexually involved with a tribal woman, is punished with having his hands cut off in the only macabre incident in the novel; this points to the increasing politicisation of the caste factor that Beteille speaks of, and is a far cry from the complacency with which Bauji can assault a sweeper woman in the Lahore of the 1940s, when the lower castes have not yet found a voice.

The shoe-trade focuses on the caste predilections in *A Suitable Boy*. Not only Haresh, but even the son-in-law of Mahesh Kapoor, Kedarnath Tandon, is engaged in it and both of them are symptomatic of the downward mobility in the caste system that Srinivas talks of. Seth makes use of this pair to actually take the reader to the sights, sounds and stinks of the nauseating jatav bastis and the leather factories and tanneries:

The dirt paths stopped suddenly at a large area surrounded by shacks and pock-marked by circular pits which had been dug into the ground and lined with hardened clay. A fearsome stench rose from the entire zone. Haresh felt sick; Kedarnath almost vomited with disgust. The sun shone harshly down, and
the heat made the stench worse still. Some of the pits were filled with a white liquid, others with a brown tannic brew. Dark, scrawny men dressed only in lungis stood from one side of the pits, scapping off fat and hair from a pile of hides. A pig was drinking at a ditch filled with stagnant, black water. Two children with filthy, matted hair, were playing in the dust near the pits.

(Seth 1993:201)

Passages like these bring alive and make real the idea of a polluting profession; but along with the disgust-filled life the tanners and flayers lead, there is also the aggressive consciousness of their rights as artisans which Seth delineates and which is responsible for the strike at Misri Mandi, their demands being for government aid in the purchase of materials and the right purchase price for their products. One of the vocal members of the community lists their demands:

They stop us from moving raw materials, stop us from getting chemicals. We have to have supporting documents and registrations. We are harassed in transit. You tell your government department to exempt us from duty and give us money.

(Seth 1993:202)

This caste and economically-based strike eventually leads to a communal riot, echoing the relation of the Mandal Commission recommendations and the Ram Janmabhoomi conflict of the 1990s.

The skill of the artisans is highlighted in Haresh’s visit to the workshop of Jagat Ram, who is also a jatav, but who is higher up in the
hierarchy since he is not directly involved in flaying, skinning and tanning. In the relatively clean surroundings here, Haresh and Kedamath even accept tea, breaking the taboo on common food. Haresh transgresses one of the more important caste rules when he sits down on one of the stools of the workmen and he immediately senses their resentment. But, he appreciates their position when the significance of the workplace as being sacred to them is explained to him. His respect for the skills of the workmen establishes an easy cordiality between them, especially between him and Jagat Ram, whom he invites for his wedding, once again, transgressing accepted norms and boundaries:

Jagat Ram reacted to Haresh's wedding invitation with visible shock... Moved as he was, he had to refuse. The two worlds did not mix; he knew it; it was a fact of life, that a jatav from Ravidaspur should be present as a guest at a wedding at the house of Dr. Kishan Chand Seth would cause social distress that he did not wish to be a centre of. It would injure his dignity.

(Seth 1993:1334)

Haresh, therefore, at least marginally, manages to cross class boundaries, and he is clearly held up as a kind of messiah in a society where caste boundaries can be handled with right ambition, pragmatism, hard-work and anti-snobbish attitude, that Haresh typifies.

Caste conflict in its most violent and feudal aspect is revealed in Days of the Turban, in which the acceptance, and even the valorisation of
the status quo in the caste hierarchies is depicted. This is the only novel which is directly concerned with regional identity. But, apart from the exploration of the upper-caste muyihal Brahmans, it is also concerned with the violence with which caste relations in the Panjab are imbued. When Uday Singh, the Sikh jat potter, who is called by his caste name, 'kumharya' allegedly elopes with the upper-caste Ahluwalia girl, Gulnari Kaur, both their fates are sealed. It does not really matter that Gulnari is not in love with Uday Singh and that she is completely willing to go through the arranged marriage with a photograph. Once she goes away with Uday Singh, she has committed a crime against the familial and caste norms of her community, and she is driven to commit suicide by her bed-ridden father, in order to salvage the family honour:

Your uncle has been good to us, and we must not disgrace him or ourselves. Fly away, my dove.

(Sharma 1986:271)

But that is not all. The harijan village which has presumed to give shelter to the fugitive couple is brutally massacred:

It is surprising that the merchants who attacked Chak Deedar were accompanied by belligerents of other castes and included both Hindus and Sikhs... their indignation was stoked by the thought of the temerity of a family of harijans in giving shelter to a potter who had abducted a merchant girl. And it gave their
anger an edge to think that chursas, chamars, jamadars and harijans had dared to presume.

(Sharma 1986:274)

Fatty Aunty, the woman who shelters them is aware of the fate that awaits them, so accepted is this pattern of violence in this region. As she tells Balbir, who has come to take Gulnari back

Son, we’re only poor harijans and mazhabis here. We can’t let her go back and tell them where she was hiding all this time. They’ll come and kill us all in revenge.

(ibedum:235)

In the light of these murders and massacre, one can hardly take the author’s general comment on caste in the Panjab seriously:

In the Panjab, fortunately, caste does not carry with it the bigotry and vehemence that it does in the more backward and less intermixed population of some states.

(Sharma1986:273)

The condoning, if not actual justification of the caste violence by Sharma is reinforced by the very positive picture he paints of the muhiyal Brahmans, and the novel becomes an apology for the ideology of upper-caste domination.

Caste concerns, therefore, come to the forefront only in the very masculinist *Days of the Turban*, once again affirming the link between the oppression of women and the lower castes; As, Memmi puts it ‘All the
oppressed are alike in some ways ' (Memmi 1990:7). In A Suitable Boy and in English, August, too, caste factors lead to tragic circumstances; in all the other novels they are present merely on the periphery – important only in the context of marriage. So, to a certain extent the observation of Andre Beteille seems to be pertinent:

Caste, undoubtedly, exists in contemporary India, ... it does not exist as a complete system anymore, ... but as a truncated system.

(Fuller 1993:161)

Rather, caste considerations, though seemingly dormant, do continue to simmer under the surface of a seemingly Sanskritised society.

4.6. To Sum Up

This chapter on Community Concerns has focussed on the depiction of the Hindu community in some of the novels of the 1980s. It does not purport to be an in-depth analysis of the Hindu mind or the Hindu way of life: it only touches upon some of the aspects of Hindu philosophy, some customs, rituals and ceremonies, and the social stratification of Hindu society, especially in terms of caste hierarchies. The political overtones of Hinduism as manifested in the advent of the Hindutva ideology in the 1990s are present in some of the novels in very marginal ways. But, the novels are entrenched in a particular social milieu and
ethos, belying the idea that they are the products of writers who are alienated from the Indian context.

In spite of the valorising of the dominant Hindu culture in direct and subtle ways, however, the majority community does not emerge as a militant or strident one; and the problems of majority v/s minorities are not highlighted in the context of the majority community. They do get reflected in the novels, which have a strong minority voice. The next chapter takes up an analysis of some of the minority community concerns expressed in works like *The Trotternama*, *Days of the Turban*, *Midnight’s Children* and *A Suitable Boy*, vis-à-vis the problems faced by them as minorities per se, and their relations with the dominant Hindu community.