CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION

The study in the preceding chapters attempts to bring home the all-encompassing influence of tradition and the concept of caste on Indian society and focuses on many of its aspects that are being neglected by literary critics and thinkers. Though, literally, every re-enactment of an idea can be regarded as tradition, any idea or its practice cannot automatically become a tradition when it is simply passed from one generation to another. Traditions are rather built and based selectively from a plethora of practices handed down from the past. In that sense, traditions may be said to be invented. Tradition, customarily, enjoys the reputation of being handed down generation after generation without any change or modification and is always used as antithesis to change and modernity. But this study has tried to show that tradition is not handed down without changes or modifications. Traditionalists do not always oppose modernity per se but insist that modernity should follow the footsteps of the traditional view of life. Tradition cannot speak for itself. It is always dependent on interpretation which is provided by the ruling classes — to be more precise, by the forces of class, caste, race and gender.

It follows that the subversive practices of subaltern history that interrogate tradition are not recognised by tradition. We have also seen how tradition transforms a text into scriptures which, in turn, support tradition. The most important factor of tradition is its association with religion. Tradition is the study of a past practice, or an idea; it is the study of “being”; it is ontological but the anteriority or “pastness” of a practice or an idea is always looked at from the theological perspective. Hence tradition has always remained a sort of onto-theology of anteriority.
The concept of caste is supported on the premise of its roots in the *Purusasuktha* of The Rigveda which is considered divine because of its immemorial past. A powerful discourse has come from the brahmanical scriptures, *Samhitas, Brahmanas, Sutras* and *Smrithis* in establishing the caste system as tradition. The scriptures have always supported the caste system by linking it to such religious documents which divide society into four *varnas* — the Brahmins, the Kshtriyas, the Vaisyas and the Sudras. Though the concept of caste is supposed to have been an uninterrupted continuity from the period of *Purusasuktha*, we find many scriptures like *Aspastamba Sutra* and *Manu Smriti* have justified deviations from the original order. The eligibility criteria for the *yaznopvaiitha*, ‘the sacred thread’, is changed and modified by *Aspastamba Sutra* to attract and provide an opportunity for all higher *varnas* who have lost the eligibility because of their age, or their birth to parents who have become outcastes through their challenge to brahmanical order. *Manu*, above all, has supported all the deviations from the caste tradition that are favourable to the Brahmins, crudely condemning all the three *varnas* but especially the Sudras. The most sophisticated discourse in favour of caste system has been provided by the *Swadharma* and the *Guna* theories of the *Gita*. *Advaita Vedanta*, which has been greatly praised by modern Hindu thinkers, follows suit. Sankara, the exponent of *Advaita*, has built up a discourse in support of the caste tradition with his “two-fold theory”. With it he could limit the “egalitarian ideals” of *Atman* and *Parmathman* only to the higher *varnas*. Perhaps he is the only sage in Hindu religion who limited the right to renunciation — the highest privilege in the brahmanical view — only to brahmins which was hitherto enjoyed by the other two higher *varnas* also. What is prominent in all these discourses is the unequivocal condemnation of Sudras.

The modern Hindu thinkers who extol *Advaita* and the greatness of India have come up with various other discourses in support of the caste system. *Vivekananda* defends “this most glorious institution”, rather ingeniously. His stand
on caste is critical. He vehemently opposes the practice of untouchability and is against the brahmins and the other “higher castes” for their “don’t touchism”. Yet he is not against caste as such for, in his view, it is socialistic. He supports the caste system by invoking the Swadharma and the Guna theories of the Gita. He praises the brahmanic qualities as the highest ideal one can ever follow but insists on the hereditary aspect of caste. He is firm about reviving the old laws of the Rishis or sages which have enunciated the four varnas and bears great veneration for the ‘codes’ of Manu and Yajnavalkya all of whom have condemned the Sudras, the women and untouchables with gross invectives. Vivekananda, like any other traditionalist, is not against some random modifications in the Varnashramadharma but insists on its continuation in its true spirit. His influence on other modern thinkers is clearly perceptible.

Gandhi, arguably the most influential personage in modern India, is also strongly inclined towards the continuation of the caste system. The only difference between Gandhi and Vivekananda is that if the latter calls it caste, the former calls it varna. In Gandhi’s opinion ‘Varna’ means pre-determination of the choice of man’s profession. He argues that if the occupation of a person is determined by birth, it avoids the ‘killing competition’ among human beings which, in his opinion, is the root cause of all the ills and maladies of the modern world. He insists that every caste has a function in society and that every caste is equally noble. He says that there is no difference between an untouchable’s profession of cleaning the dirt and the brahmin’s profession of preaching. Yet Gandhi has supported the superior position of the brahmins at many places. He openly supports the injunctions of the scriptures against the sudras studying the Vedas, for in his view, “A sudra means a spiritually uncultured ignorant”, “a man steeped in sin”(The Message, 20). Yet Gandhi justifies the hereditary aspect of caste system in the name of equality among the four varnas. He admonishes a carpenter for his
wish to become a lawyer, “the easiest way to steal money”. So Gandhi’s entire discourse has been to support and justify the hereditary aspect of the caste system.

Both these thinkers have one thing in common. They support the caste system unequivocally. For Vivekananda, if it is a ‘glorious institution’, for Gandhi, it is the most ideal system with its principle of ‘pre-determination of the choice of man’s profession’. For them, it is a very humane system, with its social mobility among the four varnas and its ability to accommodate various ‘inferior races’. Both of them take for granted the orientalist construction of India as spiritual. They do not question the hegemony of the brahmins and caste Hindus over the lower castes and women. Their discourses try to legitimize the caste tradition from a modern point of view and with a humane face. Their justification has strengthened the existing caste system and finds reflection in various walks of life, including creative writing.

The interrogation of tradition and the caste system has come from Ambedkar. Being an “untouchable” himself, Ambedkar had tasted the bitterness of the caste system and waged a relentless struggle all through his life against the brahmanical tradition which nationalists like Vivekananda and Gandhi had tried to uphold. Ambedkar’s scholarly intervention into the study of Hindu scriptures drives him to call for the ‘annihilation of caste’ itself. Although the nationalists found great inspiration in the Gita, Ambedkar treats it as ‘Manu in a nutshell’. If the nationalists have supported the caste systems in their discourses in terms of socialism and democracy, Ambedkar has amply demonstrated how the caste system is against the very spirit of democracy.

In the debate on the caste system, there have been number of discourses for the past two thousand years in support of the caste system. There have also been discourses against this tradition although they are very few. The very declaration that if a Sudra knows the Vedas, his body should be split into two tells us that
there have been traditions which enabled the Sudra to study the Vedas. But it would seem that these traditions were few and could never become dominant (except in the period of Maurian Empire) and hence they could not attain the status of tradition.

We have seen how the concept of caste has been constructed, strengthened, modified, rationalised, justified and institutionalised. When the nationalists were responding to it, they had to face the bigger enemy of colonialism which prompted them to look at caste in a way that is different from their predecessors. But the influence of Ambedkar is perhaps as significant as that of nationalists, and so the creative writers could not escape the great debate on this tradition. The three writers I examine—Raja Rao, U R Ananthamurthy and Laxman Gaikwad—have responded to this debate on tradition and on the caste system in their own way.

The most favourable response among the three writers to caste system has come from Raja Rao. Rao consistently upholds the tradition of caste. His work The Serpent and the Rope, particularly, abounds with statements that uphold the tradition of brahminism and thereby, the caste system. He starts the debate with the very first sentence of the novel telling readers in an autobiographical tone that he was born a Brahmin, and the fact remains that through out the novel he endeavours to become a true brahmin — ‘that is devoted to truth’. He does not reject the caste tradition and nowhere does he make a direct statement in favour of the tradition of caste. But his protagonist, Ramaswamy’s endeavour to become a true brahmin brings out the writer’s position on this tradition. Rama’s contention that one becomes a brahmin owing to his association with ‘Truth’ amply mirrors the influence of Vivekananda while Rama’s strong attachment to his caste relatives and his pride as a brahmin and “the truth” that he speaks are not quite dissimilar to the views of Gandhi. Rao essentialises the caste tradition in conducting the debate on whether one is a brahmin by birth or by qualities. It appears that Ramaswamy
favours the criteria of brahmanic qualities to determine the brahminhood of a person but his insistence on the caste symbols of the brahmanic tradition like the stories of Rama, Sathyavratha and his approval of Saroja’s marriage within the caste indicate that he is deeply inclined towards the caste tradition based on birth. Raja Rao’s position can be further understood if we consider his other works which repeat the brahmanic concerns of Ramaswamy. All his heroes, right from Moorothy in Kanthapura to Siva in The Chessmaster and His Moves are not only brahmins but highly articulate spokespersons of the spirit of the brahmanic tradition.

U R Anantha Murthy, another author I have examined, does not say anything directly about the caste system but the situation he creates in his works amply suggests his inclination towards the continuation of this tradition. His protagonist, Praneshacharya, in Samskara possesses all the qualities of a traditional brahmin. By contrasting the brahmanic Praneshacharya, his religiosity and respect for traditional values like devotion to God and respect for the institution of marriage and with Naranappa, Anantha Murthy celebrates the prevalence of the caste system. Anantha Murthy’s act of giving no space or recognition to lower caste characters like Chandri, suggests the writer’s subtle advocacy of brahmanism. All the Hindu gods he mentions with reverence like Vishnu, Krishna and Rama are protectors of this dharma. Although Anantha Murthy spoofs the hypocrisy of brahminism, he also supports, though indirectly, all that Raja Rao upholds in the name of the ‘Brahman’.

Unlike Raja Rao and Anantha Murthy, Laxman Gaikwad presents a different perception and viewpoint. He interrogates caste and exposes the true nature of the brahmins, their gluttony and lust through the narration of his own life experiences. He does not praise or criticize brahmins, nor is he interested in the debate whether one is a brahmin by birth or by quality. Rather, he totally rejects the caste system. If Raja Rao and Anantha Murthy support what Vivekananda and
Gandhi have said about the caste system, Gaikwad can be said to vehemently
denounce their discourses and gives creative expression to what Ambedkar has
believed and propagated.

All three writers respond to the contemporary debate on art; that is they try
to tackle the question whether art exists for the sake of art or for the sake of the
people. If Raja Rao shuns the responsibility of a writer in fighting for the cause of
the oppressed and the downtrodden in the name of dharma, Anantha Murthy seems
to redeem himself from the yoke of responsibility by saying that he does not like
art that is ‘deliberate’ under the ostensible fear of didacticism. Both Rao and
Anantha Murthy seem to be apprehensive of being dubbed or branded as
propagandists. Gaikwad remains the lone voice that champions the cause of the
exploited masses and undertakes propaganda for men.

The first two writers dwell upon the concept of dharma. If Rao and Anantha
Murthy use it to support and uphold the brahmanic tradition, Gaikwad exposes the
chinks in the picture and the exploitation carried out by the brahmins. Customarily,
Indian literatures have either ignored untouchables and denotified tribes or
portrayed them as victims in need of saviors, as objects without voice or agency.
Gaikwad has broken new ground with a representation of these undeclared and
hidden experiences. He narrates the stories of life in a denotified tribe existing at
the bottom rung of society; his heroic struggle to survive this preordained life of
perpetual physical and mental persecution, the cruel obstacles he overcame to
become the first literate person among his community, his coming to
consciousness and his transformation into a speaking subject bearing witness to the
oppression and exploitation that hindered him as an individual and as a member of
a stigmatized and oppressed community.

The varying images that the three writers create of the Indian nation differ
even as they have some parallels. In Raja Rao’s works, all the primary characters
are brahmins and brahmanism is openly upheld. But Anantha Murthy, though a supporter of brahmanism, is different from Rao. Instead of glorifying brahmanism, he quietly upholds it by not suggesting any alternatives in favour of dalits. The conceptions of both these writers exclude the majority of the people of India. There is no space for other religions in their narratives. If Rao’s India is packed with the brahmins and the rich, Anantha Murthy presents a picture of India with the upper caste and middle class people. On the other hand, Gaikwad presents himself as a hero, telling about the vicissitudes of his life and how his caste (or castelessness) throws him into an eternal crisis. He presents the exploited, starving and diseased masses as the true heirs of one the “world’s greatest civilization”. He thus gives an entirely new formulation to literature. He makes it plain that dalit literature does not just seek to give an account of the anguish, misery, pain and exploitation of dalits, or draw a tear-streaked and sensitive portrait of their agony; rather it is that which is absent from “original” consciousness, the simple and straightforward perspective that breaks the spell of the shadow of the cultural, historical and social roles for dalits.

If India for Rao and Anantha Murthy is spiritual, as Vivekananda contends, for Laxman Gaikwad, Indian spiritualism is mere sham. If Raja Rao and Anantha Murthy represent India with a view to reinforce the traditional life dominated by the caste system, Gaikwad’s portrayal of India challenges all traditional views of life. Thus, the study of caste system in the preceding chapters shows how important tradition and caste system is in understanding and evaluating mainstream literature as well as the new literature that is taking shape and projecting new realities. Their views about tradition are instrumental in the rendition of Indian life in alternative ways and provide us with a better understanding of social issues.