Speaking from the Village: Hindi Literary Representations of the Village in the Post-1990 Era

GUANCHEN LAI

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South Asia Section, School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics
SOAS, University of London

Contents

Abstract

This thesis explores the village and the rural imaginary in contemporary Hindi literary literature in the post-liberalisation era, when contemporary scholarly discourse and public attention have tended to focus on megacities created by the inflow of immigrants and the process of urbanisation. In contrast to the pessimistic view that the village has been marginalised in Hindi literature, the comparatively rich and variegated corpus of writing on the village suggests in fact a renaissance of Hindi village fictional writing after the city- and middle-class centred New Story of the 1950s and 1960s. I examine Hindi literary writing that engages not only with the present conditions and problems of the rural world, but also with the Hindi literary tradition of representing the village going back to Premchand in the early twentieth century and Renu in the 1950s. Through a close reading of novels and short stories published after 1990, the thesis focuses on questions of representation and on the narrativisation of themes like the agrarian crisis, gender, and caste politics.

More specifically, instead of conforming to any single formal paradigm, this thesis shows that contemporary Hindi village writing employs multiple genres and forms, including extensive family sagas, detailed political dramas, idealistic tales, novels consisting of loosely-linked subplots and pithy short stories, for the representation of different worldviews towards rural subjects and the rural world. I also shed light on the fact that while resonating with social scientific discourses on the village, contemporary Hindi rural texts also register their own thematic traits, offering an alternative public commentary and reshaping the way in which the rural world is currently imagined. I argue that positionality of the writers and narrators plays an important role that informs the narrative strategies in portraying rural subjects. Drawing upon Bakhtin's idea of "chronotope", I identify a number of key spatial coordinates that move across different texts and inform their plot

development and characterisation. Instead of lamenting the harshness of contemporary rural life and asking for abandoning the village, contemporary Hindi village writing tends to celebrate the agency of the village in tackling its problems and continues to have faith in the rural world as a prolonged livable space.

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A Note on Transliteration

For quotations from Hindi sources in the body of the thesis I have employed the transliteration system followed by R. S. McGregor in his *The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*. I do not transliterate the names of persons and places that appear in the body of the thesis and outside direct quotations. In transliterated titles I have employed capital letters according to the system employed in English. Hindi words that have become part of the English language, like Brahmin, Thakur, sari, ricksha and Sahib, have been written without diacritical marks.

Introduction

The "Consequential and Untold Story" of Contemporary Rural India

> Most of world's scholarly and media attention is on megacities and the story of rapid urbanisation they are held to represent … However, the greater part of the world's population continues to live in rural areas. This will continue to be the case or some time to come. The consequential and untold story, however, is the radical transformation of the countryside, as things formerly thought of as villages become something else. These places mark the emergence of a new form of settlement which are neither cities nor villages in the conventional uses of such terms. The language of social science is ill-equipped for these new realities.[1]

In the first half of the 2010s, a research project led by my own university SOAS, University of London, restudied three Indian villages that had been the subject of intensive anthropological studies in the 1950s to see what had changed after a gap of more than 50 years. Drawing upon older field notes and data collected from newly conducted fieldwork between 2011-2013, the project examined changes in the villages, ranging from economic and demographic structures to everyday social and religious practices emerging in people's lives.[2] A photo exhibition in 2016 marking the end of the project provided direct visual contrast—but also displayed

[1] Edward Simpson and Alice Tilche, eds., *The Future of the Rural World?* (London: SOAS, University of London, 2016), ii.

[2] A conference held at SOAS, University of London under the title "Future of the rural world? Africa & Asia" in Oct, 2015 constitutes part of the project, which also generates several publications, including Edward Simpson, 'Village Restudies: Trials and Tribulations', *Economic and Political Weekly* LI, no. 26–27 (2016): 33–42; Alice Tilche and Edward Simpson, 'On Trusting Ethnography: Serendipity and the Reflexive Return to the Fields of Gujarat', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 23, no. 4 (30 August 2017); Edward Simpson et al., 'A Brief History of Incivility in Rural Postcolonial India: Caste, Religion, and Anthropology', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 60, no. 1 (2017). The first two papers focus more on the methodological aspects of the project, addressing the question of doing anthropological research, because the approach of juxtaposing studies of different time periods requires justification, whereas revolving around the changes in quotidian practices in the village, the last paper on "incivility" argues the main reason behind the commonplace violence in village life has shifted from caste to religion-related issues.

connections—between what the villages looked like in the 1950s and the changed rural landscape and socio-economic aspects of rural life in the present.

Excerpted from the introduction to the catalogue of the exhibition, the epigraph reveals that the project not only showcased the changing characteristics and issues in rural India after half a century, but also reflected upon the very idea of the Indian village in an era shaped by economic liberalisation and globalisation. The project draws attention to the drastic transformation of the village that has largely escaped the radar of observers of post-liberalisation India. To give but one example, the changing form of rural settlements challenges the way we perceive the space of the village. Apart from internal shifts in village structure, urban-rural relations are also overhauled with the expansion of the city and its encroachment upon agricultural lands. At the same time, speaking of the gloomy future of the village compared to the booming city, the researchers of the project also pointed out that the "current configuration of rural life in India is increasingly resource intensive and exploitative".[1] That is to say, in the eyes of social scientists—and also of the rural dwellers—the ongoing mass migration and the growing urban-rural gap call into question the very sustainability of the Indian village as a space to live and work in the near future.[2]

Social anthropologists and development economists continue to engage with the "consequential and untold" story of the Indian village, which plays an important role—if not more important than the city, given its larger number of inhabitants—in the current dramatic transformations on India as a whole. Sharing with the SOAS project the intention of "revisiting" the Indian village, my thesis investigates the modes of representation in contemporary Hindi writing about the village. As a

[1] Simpson and Tilche, *The Future of the Rural World?*, 182.
[2] See Simpson and Tilche, 83.

sociological/ethnographic object of enquiry, the village always demands definition. In the administrative context, a village is first of all defined in terms of local governance.[1] In addition, the official definition emphasises community, culture and politics:

> A village consists of a habitation or a group of habitations or a hamlet or a group of hamlets comprising a community and managing its affairs in accordance with traditions and customs.[2]

Hindi writers tend to use the word *gāṁv* (from the Sanskrit term *grām,* which is used in official discourse, e.g. *gram panchayat*) as an overarching term without considering variations in size.[3] A *gāṁv* is a coherent and long-standing social and spatial unit marked by a sense of belonging and mutual recognition among individuals and castes and by a common public space (the village *caupāl*) and self-administration through the *panchayat*. Dalits and other marginalised groups live at some distance from the village, spatial distance marking their subordinate status. Social relations are at the core of Hindi writers' understanding of the village. For instance, caste and gender relations between social groups remain key themes across contemporary Hindi village texts. Although the boundaries between the village and the city have become porous, Hindi village writers still see the village as a bounded unit, separated from and in opposition to the city or the slum. They are fully aware of the trend of integration and register the movement of people across rural-urban boundaries and the adverse economic impact on the village.

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[1] According to the Constitution of India, "village" means a village specified by the Governor by public notification to be a village for the purposes of this Part and includes a group of villages so specified. This is cited from Tommaso Sbriccoli and Edward Simpson, 'Enacting Nationalist History: Buildings, Processions and Sound in the Making of a Village in Central India', *Quaderni Asiatici* 104 (2013): 13–44.

[2] This definition is found in the 1996 Panchayat Extension to the Scheduled Areas Act, also cited in Sbriccoli and Simpson.

[3] In the Hindi context, *grāmīṇ* (rural) is also a widely used term to refer to the village, making the village equivalent to "rural". As I will show in my examination of the short story collection *Kathā meṁ Gāṁv* in chapter 4, the editor actually attempts to show horizontally regional variations of the village by including works of writers from different Hindi-speaking states.

The "untold story" of the drastic transformation of the Indian village in social science, I suggest, also applies to the field of literature, where critics contend that rural themes have become invisible in the contemporary Hindi literary landscape while in fact a lot of important writing continues to be done.

> There are two Indias in India. The first India consists of ten percent of rich people, whereas the second belongs to poor people, the remaining ninety percent. 72 percent of the second India living in villages are the most exploited and oppressed people in this country. Globalisation is celebrated in the first India while peasants of the second India are victims of hunger and kill themselves. The first India is ruled by consumerism, whereas the second India is dominated by inequality, economic distress and repression. Large numbers of Dalits, women and tribespeople are still enslaved in Indian villages.[1]

> It has been said that the country lives in villages or it is a country of villages. There have been some changes in this statement. We must say that, over time, villages in the country, as well as Hori and Dhaniya—are more sophisticatedly oppressed than before and restless with distress, starvation, poverty and disregard. Their pain is now even deeper. Their cry is paid no attention to by the rich urbanites who have a special filter in their ears.[2]

These two quotes above, excerpted from the introduction and foreword of the short story anthology *Kathā meṁ Gāṁv* (The Village in the Story, see Chapter 4), voice the grave concern of Hindi literati over the conditions of today's Indian villages. Both highlight the gap between the village and the city, and the worry that the village has become seriously marginalised in economic and development terms. As the editor Subhash Chandra Kushwaha says in the second quote, the voices from and

[1] Manager Pandey, 'Kathā Meṁ Gāṁv Kī Bahurangī Tasvīroṁ Kā Alabam', in *Kathā Meṁ Gāṁv: Bhāratīya Gāṁvoṁ Kā Badaltā Yathārth*, ed. Subhash Chandra Kushwaha (Samvad Prakashan, 2006), 5.
[2] Subhash Chandra Kushwaha, 'Yah saṅgrah kyoṁ', in *Kathā meṁ Gāṁv: Bhāratīya Gāṁvoṁ kā Badaltā Yathārth*, ed. Subhash Chandra Kushwaha (Samvad Prakashan, 2006), 15. Hori and Dhaniya are characters from Premchand's 1936 novel *Godān*. See Premchand, *Godān* (Allahabad: Saraswati Press, 1936).

about the villages fail to get across to urban affluent audiences and no one really cares about them. This clear partiality towards the city over the village conforms to what Kathryn Hansen had already pointed out in the 1970s about Hindi literary studies when she conducted her doctoral research on Phanishwarnath Renu's writings:

> Most Western students of modern India have directed their attention to the cities and urban culture, perhaps recognizing that in the twentieth century the cities have become the primary centres of political power and social change. Cities are also the home of the educated classes who form the new intellectual elite, and in the West, at least, modern literature is assumed to develop hand in hand with this class and thrive largely within this milieu. These assumptions, however, have restricted the Western outlook on contemporary Indian literature, and as a result the more diffuse regional sources of culture and the literary contribution of the local environments have been overlooked.[1]

This continues to be true despite the fact that some of the most acclaimed Hindi writers of recent decades—Maitreyi Pushpa, Sanjeev and Omprakash Valmiki—have continued to write about the village.

This thesis explores the village and the rural imaginary in Hindi literature of the post-liberalisation era, when contemporary scholarly discourse, public attention, and Indian writing in English have tended to focus on the Indian megacities and the flow of immigrants into them and abroad. It argues that, by contrast, Hindi writers have not stopped writing about the rural world, part of a long Hindi literary tradition that was established by Premchand (1880-1936) in the 1920s and '30s and renewed by Phanishwarnath Renu (1921-1977) and other so-called "regionalist" writers in the

[1] Kathryn Hansen, 'Phanishwarnath Renu: The Integration of Rural and Urban Consciousness in the Modern Hindi Novel' (PhD, University of California, Berkeley, 1978), 2. Although Hansen made this point from the perspective of a Western student of Hindi literature, the tendency of sidelining the village is not limited to the West. I will demonstrate later that Hindi literati express dissatisfaction about the marginalisation of the village, especially in the sphere of literary criticism. Moreover, to my knowledge South Asian studies in China also limit the attention to Renu and regionalism, see Yonghong Jiang, 'Xian Dai Yin Di Yu Zuo Jia Lei Nu Xiao Shuo Chuang Zuo Yan Jiu [A Study on Modern Hindi Writer Renu and His Fiction]' (PhD, Peking University, 2008).

1950s and ’60s. In fact, we can even speak of a renaissance of Hindi village fictional writing after the city- and middle-class centred New Story of the 1950s and 1960s that Hansen’s quote adumbrates. This thesis consists of close readings of novels and short stories published after 1990 that engage substantially with the radical and extensive political, social and cultural transformations of the rural world.[1] My thesis will focus on aspects of representation. It will consider broad issues of theme and genre, of the representativeness and positionality of the works and their authors, but also analyse narrative aspects such as plot structure, characterisation, and focalisation or point of view to show how village-related issues are narrativised. My major research questions revolve around narrative, stylistic and political aspects: 1) What themes are most relevant in contemporary rural fiction? What generic form do they take—quasi-ethnography, political fiction, or family saga, etc.? 2) How does the issue of positionality work in relation to village writing? Do the writers/narrators’ gender and caste identities inform the ways in which rural subjects are represented? 3) How does the space of the village work within the texts as a narrative element? 4) How do Hindi literary texts on the village relate to media and social science debates? Are the literary representations in dialogue with discourses of social science on rural themes, including the developmental state, caste and gender dynamics, the agrarian crisis, etc.? 5) Finally, is the village in contemporary Hindi writing idyllic or dystopic?

I argue that contemporary Hindi writing about the village focuses, perhaps unsurprisingly, mainly on caste politics, gender politics, and the crisis of the agrarian

[1] I am conscious of the debate on whether the economic liberalisation in early 1990s should be regarded as the starting point of the new era. Arjun Appadurai, for instance, argues that the split from the past took place long before when media and migration as shaping forces of modernity, see Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Public Worlds, v. 1 (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3. I see the liberalisation as a key moment in Hindi literature as many active writers today began to publish after 1991 and the texts they produce, as we shall see, do demonstrate some engagement with the current situation as a result of changes initiated then.

economy and farmers' livelihood. The genres Hindi writers employ are quite varied, from sprawling family sagas (Ch. 1), to pithy short stories (Ch. 4) and novels consisting of loosely-linked subplots (Ch. 3), from blow-by-blow political drama to idealistic tale (Ch. 2). Representation is a crucial issue—both in terms of the works' claim and attempt to present the "reality" of the contemporary village (all the works but one are in some version of realist mode), and of the representativeness of the writers and their positionality. To begin with the latter, although all the writers live in cities, their roots or direct connection with villages give them the confidence and authority to write with first-hand knowledge. They also give many of them a particular positionality: thus, Maitreyi Pushpa writes from a feminist perspective, while Dalit writers like Jai Prakash Kardam writes from a Dalit perspective; their different perspectives inform the strategy of plot development and characterisation. In terms of representational strategies, some writers employ shifting points of view, intercutting narratives which follow the lives of many characters, as well as extensive narratorial commentary of socio-economic problems.

The reasons why I have explicitly, if not consistently, compared literary writing with extra-literary discourses and scholarship about the contemporary village in the political and economic-developmental spheres are three: first, because Hindi writers on the village clearly draw upon such discourses—e.g. on framers' suicides or Dalit politicisation—but also because it helps show how literature is different and offers i.e., to use Fredric Jameson's formula, an "imaginary resolution of a real contradiction".[1] For example, in the novel *Chappar* (*The Thatched Roof*, 1994, Chapter 2), the final reconciliation between the Dalits and the high-castes shows what is needed for caste conflict to be resolved; by contrast, the short story *Viṣbel*

[1] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Cornell University Press, 2014), 62.

(*Poisoned Vine*, Chapter 4) shows the destructive consequences of protracted caste war. The two texts offer two different narrative solutions to a similar problem.

Secondly, as I hope to demonstrate, a comparative approach encompassing non-literary and literary discourses around the village is helpful in capturing how generic themes move across the domains, but also how literary texts, thanks to their particular perspective, narrativisation, and imagery, offer another kind of public commentary and can shape—or challenge—the way in which the rural world is currently understood and imagined. For instance, while public discourse on the issue of farmers' suicides centralises heavily on indebtedness, *Phāṁs* (*The Noose*, 2015, Chapter 3) offers a broader perspective that sheds light on different aspects of this issue.

Thirdly, while Hindi literary representations find inspiration in social scientific research and tend to offer alternative commentaries and imaginary solutions to rural problems, they also overlap with anthropological, fieldwork-based accounts of the village— in particular the genre of ethnography—in some of their formal features. As social anthropologist Paul Aktinson points out, "sociological messages are conveyed through a variety of textual devices and they can be understood in ways analogous to those applied to 'literary' texts."[1] To give just two examples, for one thing some ethnographic accounts focus on individual stories to carry broader meanings, just like literary characters.[2] Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan's article on Indian rural cosmopolitianism begins with a description of Manavalan, a resident of Chennai, and his migration that makes him a representative of migration as a social phenomenon.[3] Another overlap is positionality

[1] Paul Atkinson, *The Ethnographic Imagination: Textual Constructions of Reality* (London: Routledge, 1990), 35. For a more detailed discussion on the politics of constructing "factual" accounts and verisimilitude in ethnography, see Atkinson, 36–42.
[2] Atkinson, *The Ethnographic Imagination*, 129–30.
[3] Vinay Gidwani and Kalyanakrishnan Sivaramakrishnan, 'Circular Migration and Rural Cosmopolitanism in India', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 37, no. 1–2 (2003): 339–367.

and its role in representation. Reflexivity is a significant feature of anthropological research, and participant observation, the main research method of social anthropology, involves "participating in the social world, in whatever role, and reflecting on the products of that participation".[1] In the case of Hindi village writing, too, it is useful to consider the positionality of the writers vis-à-vis the characters and situations they represent and how it mediates their representations.

With regard to the earlier tradition of village writing in Hindi, contemporary writing shows both continuities and discontinuities: from the very beginning with Premchand, village writing has been realistic and has focused on social problems such as indebtedness and caste discrimination and violence. While rural debt is still a problem, in contemporary writing the exploitative landlord has disappeared, and rather than the *sahukar* (moneylender) now it is generally the economic downturn and disinvestment that are to blame for the agrarian crisis. State institutions were already present and involved in village writing in the 1950s such as Renu's and Shivprasad Singh's[2]; in contemporary writing state development is still present, but it is ineffectiveness and corruption that are narrated. In the novel *Tarpaṇ* (*The Offering*, 2004, Chapter 2), different actors learn how to manipulate the local state for their own interests, and as such the corrupt and malleable local state is shown to be an equaliser among unequal castes. And while caste and gender were key themes in earlier village writing, too, contemporary writing highlights strong and militant women and low-caste characters who are unafraid of the consequences of confronting the higher castes. Lower-caste men and women are still shown to suffer

[1] Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*, 2nd ed (London: Routledge, 1995), 17. Fully aware of the role of the researcher in fieldworks, Alice Tilche and Edward Simpson also claim that "the intersubjective and personal nature of fieldwork has been scrutinized and elaborated to the point that fieldwork is now sometimes regarded as little more than a voyage of self-discovery. The 'I' of the participant and the eyes of 'I-the-observer' are now key.", see Tilche and Simpson, 'On Trusting Ethnography', 3.

[2] See Francesca Orsini, 'Reading Together: Hindi, Urdu, and English Village Novels', in *Indian Literature and the World*, ed. Rossella Ciocca and Neelam Srivastava (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017), 61–85.

discrimination and brutality, but the focus of the representation has gradually shifted to struggle, resistance and mobilisation. While *Chappar* (1994) and *Tarpaṇ* (2004) focus exclusively on caste, *Almā Kabūtarī* (2000, Chapter 1) exemplifies how caste and gender are interwoven. *Phāṁs* touches on both caste and gender in its subplots when addressing the causes of the agrarian crisis. Together, caste, gender, and the economic crisis are the three main themes of contemporary Hindi village writing. Finally, whereas because of Renu regional or *aṁcalik* fiction (see below) has been associated with a certain pleasure and playfulness with regards to language and oral traditions, this aspect is muted in contemporary village writing.

Filling the gap in the scholarship on Hindi contemporary village writing, my study draws critical attention to the ways in which Hindi writers have in fact continued to write about the village and are dealing with a rural world that is being reshaped under the influence of liberalisation, globalisation, and caste politics.[1] In broadest terms, my thesis highlights the diversity of perspectives and narrative strategies used by writers to capture the transformations taking place in the village. For instance, through a comparative reading, I show how differently caste politics in the village are represented from Dalit and non-Dalit perspectives. While the post-liberalisation era provides the crucial context for my investigation, I also acknowledge the challenges posed by such proximity to the period under review.[2]

[1] Many studies have been undertaken to examine from an overall perspective the impact of liberalisation on India, and particularly addressing the questions related to the village, in terms of the political, social and cultural effects. See, for instance, Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (Penguin UK, 2012); Ramachandra Guha, *India After Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy* (Pan Macmillan, 2011); Ali Mohammed Khusro and N. S. Siddharthan, *Indian Economy and Society in the Era of Globalisation and Liberalisation: Essays in Honour of Prof. A. M. Khusro* (Academic Foundation, 2005); Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, *India: Development and Participation* (Oxford University Press, 2002); Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India* (Cambridge University Press, 2001); Alva Bonaker, *Between Village and City* (BoD – Books on Demand, 2012).

[2] As the project deals with an ongoing phase of change and development, it became a daunting task to establish and cover a comprehensive and meaningful archive, provided that new literature production continued to emerge. The novel *Phāṃs* (2015), for instance, analysed in chapter 3, was published after my research started.

The novel *Phāṁs* (2015), for example, deals with the crisis of farmers' suicides, a problem which has been widely written in the media against the backdrop of globalisation. Despite the fact that the novel may read like a collection and review of stories of farmers' distress, its emphasis on the emotional travails of the characters subtly differs from the media coverage of the issue.

Before I turn to the question of representation, let me first survey the changes and continuities in the discourses about the village in the social sciences and in literature, from the idealisation of the village republic in the colonial period, to the ethnographic discoveries of social dynamics and mobility, and to the contemporary analysis of rural development. I then lay out my theoretical framework and outlining the scope of the thesis through a brief description of each chapter.

Imagining the Rural World in Hindi Literature and Social Sciences—A Brief Overview

Colonial Constructs of the Village and Premchand

The ways in which the Indian village has been imagined in the post-independence era registers a significant departure from colonial writing, in which the village was predominantly constructed as a self-sufficient "republic", and India was essentialised as a land of "village republics". This notion was first put forward in 1810 by Sir Charles Metcalfe, a servant of the East India Company, and was reiterated in many writings on rural India, like Henry Maine's *Village-communities in the East and West* (1876) and H. Baden Powell's *The Indian village community* (1896).[1] The Indian village remained an important topic in colonial accounts, not only because the rural population constituted 90 percent of the total population,

[1] See Henry Maine, *Village-Communities in the East and West* (H. Holt, 1876); Baden Henry Baden-Powell, *The Indian Village Community* (Longmans, Green, and Company, 1896).

according to the 1931 census[1]—but also because the idea of "village republics" served the colonial agenda of maintaining India as largely a premodern society and backward country.[2] Each village was imagined as a self-contained, autonomous and changeless unit. Three key features, Jan Breman points out, framed this "republic": a large degree of political-administrative autonomy, economic self-sufficiency linking agriculture with artisan crafts and services, and immutability and immobility.[3] "Organic inside, atomic outside", as Ron Inden summarises it.[4] It was such idyllic construct of the Indian village that dominated the views of colonial thinkers, who, Inden points out, "had no direct knowledge of their object".[5]

This construct of the Indian village profoundly influenced Indian nationalist thinkers, including Gandhi, who actively promoted and practised this village-oriented vision, and even asserted that "our cities are not India".[6] Gandhi was not born in a village himself and his understanding of the village drew heavily upon other colonial writings—he made explicit reference to the works of British thinkers in his own writing.[7] Gandhi saw rural India as a morally superior alternative to the urban-centric Western paradigm of modernity which, he claimed, is exploitative of "millions of villagers left rotting in hopeless ignorance and misery".[8] The village was

[1] See Lewis Sydney Steward O'Malley, *India's Social Heritage* (Clarendon Press, 1934), 100.
[2] See Ronald B. Inden, *Imagining India* (Indiana University Press, 1990), 132. and Surinder S. Jodhka, 'From "Book View" to "Field View": Social Anthropological Constructions of the Indian Village', *Oxford Development Studies* 26, no. 3 (1998): 311–331.
[3] See Jan Breman, 'The Village in Focus', in *The Village in Asia Revisited*, ed. Jan Breman, Ashwani Saith, and Peter Kloos (Oxford University Press, 1997), 16.
[4] See Inden, *Imagining India*, 134.
[5] Inden, 133. Henry Baden-Powell, who served in the British Army, noted that the self-sufficient and "organic" village formed a kind of "hierarchy" with the village headman superior to others, see Baden-Powell, *The Indian Village Community*, 16.
[6] Mahatma Gandhi, *The Gandhi Reader: A Sourcebook of His Life and Writings* (Grove Press, 1994), 229.
[7] For instance, Gandhi first in 1894 referred to Sir Henry Maine's constructs on the village communities, see Mahatma Gandhi, *Collected Works*, vol. 1 (The Publications Division, Ministry of information and broadcasting, Government of India, 1958), 93–94. Then later in 1939, again, he made reference to Maine's "village republics" in order to justify his utopian vision of the village swaraj, see Mahatma Gandhi, *Collected Works*, vol. 71 (The Publications Division, Ministry of information and broadcasting, Government of India, 1978), 4.
[8] Mahatma Gandhi, *Collected Works*, vol. 86 (Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1982), 232.

therefore effectively used as a political symbol to project India as a unified entity, an alternative social structure, so as to undermine British colonial rule. In this way, Gandhi successfully brought the village and the majority of the Indian population living in the rural world into the nationalist movement, which, before him, had mainly focused on urban spaces and urban elites.[1] More importantly, Gandhi firmly believed that the village was at the core of Indian civilisation and blamed the colonial rule for its negative impact on Indian villagers and "reducing [them] to a state of miserable dependence and idleness".[2] This belief finally led to his conceptulisation of "village swaraj", a utopian vision for the emerging new nation:

> My idea of village swaraj is that it is completely republic, independent of its neighbours for its own vital wants, and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is a necessity … As far as possible every activity will be conducted on the cooperative basis. There will be no castes such as we have today with their graded untouchability … To model such a village may be the work of a lifetime.[3]

Clearly, Gandhi's village shared similaries with what earlier colonial thinkers imagined as village-oriented India. This utopian vision also reflected Gandhi's concern with the problems of the existing villages. Caste and untouchability, as we saw in the quote, would not fit in with such a model village. In this sense, Gandhi's idea of the village also involved a reformist agenda.

Gandhi's vision with villages forming the core not only influenced the nationalist movement[4], but also animated Hindi village writing of the time, with Premchand emerging as one of the very first and most eminent Hindi writer to

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[1] For the rural involvement in the nationalist movement, see Ainslie Thomas Embree and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Imagining India: Essays on Indian History* (Oxford University Press, 1989), 165; Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, 125.
[2] Mahatma Gandhi, *Collected Works*, vol. 59 (The Publications Division, Ministry of information and broadcasting, Government of India, 1974), 409.
[3] Mahatma Gandhi, *Collected Works*, vol. 76 (The Publications Division, Ministry of information and broadcasting, Government of India, 1979), 308–9.
[4] See Surinder S. Jodhka, 'Nation and Village: Images of Rural India in Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2002, 3343–3353.

engage closely and seriously with rural themes and village society.[1] Forcing a "confrontation with reality", to use the words of Geetanjali Pandey, Premchand abandoned the romanticised view of the village swaraj and instead explored the problems in the rural world in his narratives.[2] As Vir Bharat Talwar and Francesca Orsini have pointed out, the Russian Revolution and the 1919-1921 peasant movement in Avadh were turning points for the "social imagination" of Hindi intellectuals, and it was not until the end of 1910s that problems affecting the rural world, such as extortionate rents, insecure tenancy, chronic debt, forced unpaid labour, and sexual exploitation began to become widely featured in Hindi public discourse.[3] In Hindi literature, the "impoverished condition of the peasantry" first appeared in poetry[4], and Premchand was first to approach the rural problem in the form of prose narratives.

For Premchand, the power and the mission of fiction was to present social ills and suggest solutions, and he saw fiction as a tool capable of generating substantial social and cultural change.[5] This goal could be achieved through the realistic delineations of setting, character and everyday social practices alongside dramatic plotlines, a narrative pattern recognised as "social realism", which aims to construct a world the reader can relate to and thus evoke emotion and empathy.[6] In his earlier

[1] See K. P. Singh, 'Premchand and Gandhism', *Social Scientist*, 1980, 47–52; Sara Rai, 'Realism as a Creative Process: Features of Munshi Premchand's Ideology', *Social Scientist* 7, no. 12 (1979): 32–42.
[2] Geetanjali Pandey, 'Premchand and the Peasantry: Constrained Radicalism', *Economic and Political Weekly* 18, no. 26 (1983): 1149–55.
[3] See Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere, 1920-1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 234; Vir Bharat Talwar, *Kisān, rāṣṭrīy āndolan aur premchand: 1918-22. Premāsram aur avadh ke kisan andolan kā vises adhyayan* (Northern Book Centre, 1990). For a brief history of the rural theme in Indian literature of other languages before Premchand, see Angela Catherine Eyre, 'Land, Language and Literary Identity: A Thematic Comparison of Indian Novels in Hindi and English' (PhD, SOAS, University of London, 2005), 83–88.
[4] Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere, 1920-1940*, 327.
[5] See Francesca Orsini, 'Introduction', in *The Oxford India Premchand*, by Premchand et al. (Oxford University Press, 2004); Premchand, 'The Nature and Purpose of Literature', *Social Scientist* 39, no. 11/12 (2011): 82–86.
[6] Orsini, 'Introduction', 2004; Rai, 'Realism as a Creative Process'.

works, his fiction clearly demonstrated the influence of Gandhi and his idealised and utopian rural vision. In *Premāśaram* (1921), for example, Premchand ends the novel optimistically with the "good" zamindar founding a rural cooperative to resolve conflicts between landlords and tenant farmers.[1] In his later fiction, most notably in his most acclaimed novel, *Godān* (1936), Premchand moved to a "harsher" form of realism.[2] In *Godān*, Premchand depicted the tragedy of a helpless tenant farmer, Hori, who not only suffers exploitation at the hands of his landlord and moneylender, but is also mired in family disputes.[3]

Despite his social realist approach, however, Premchand's delineation of rural subjects and rural life in north India reflected few linguistic or cultural particularities of that region. For example, all the characters in *Godān*, set in an Avadh village, speak *Kharī Bolī* or modern standard Hindi, regardless of their caste, class or social background. This absence of specific local traces has been criticised by Sadan Jha:

> It may be claimed that in Premchand's world, the region remained devoid of its own multi-lingual practices, villages emptied of their caste specificities and the peasant world without their regional cultural moorings.[4]

In this sense Premchand arguably echoed Gandhi's homogenising construction of the village, which also tended to ignore regional traits. This lack of regional coordinates in Premchand's writing makes his villages less identifiable and more generic—thus they can be regarded as microcosms and representatives of the

[1] Premchand, *Premāśram* (Allabahad: Sarasvati Press, 1962).
[2] Indu Prakash Pandey also contends the transition, arguing that "toward the end of his life, Premchand had moved away from faith in Gandhism, reformism, and his own idealist realism to 'complete realism'." See Indu Prakash Pandey, *Hindī Ke Ādṁcalik Upanyāsoṁ Meṁ Jīvan-Satya* (New Delhi: National Publishing House, 1979), 4.
[3] Premchand, *Godān*. For a study of how realism works in this novel, see Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India* (Oxford University Press, India, 1994), 145–65.
[4] Sadan Jha, 'Visualising a Region: Phaniswarnath Renu and the Archive of the "Regional–Rural" in the 1950s', *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 49, no. 1 (2012): 1–35.

Indian rural world, in which the unprivileged grapple with caste and economic exploitation, encouraging social reform in preparation for an independent nation state. Premchand was the dominant voice in Hindi lliterature on rural issues in the first three decades of the twentieth century.[1] Inspired by Premchand's new social realist narrative mode, some of his contemporaries also began to write about the village through the lens of realism—writers of "Premchand's tradition" (*premcand ki paramparā ke upanyāskār*), as Hindi critic Gopal Rai calls them.[2] Although these writers also attempted to demonstrate in a realist manner the harsh living conditions in the village for small farmers by focusing, for instance, on exploitative landlords and the sufferings of tenant farmers, according to Rai these writers lacked the "progressive vision and literary craft" that Premchand displayed in his works.[3]

Registering a drastic difference from colonial constructs, the first two decades post-independence witnessed a "closer" and more scientific perspective to understand the village. It was in these decades that the village theme also regained significance in Hindi literature.

Discovering the Indian Village in the 1950s, Hindi Regionalism and beyond

The Indian village became the main field of research for social scientists in the 1950s, when anthropologists such as M.N. Srinivas, D.N. Majumdar and S.C. Dube undertook fieldwork in various villages in order to decolonise and contest the constructs of orientalists and colonial officials with data collected on-site—to use

[1] The success of Premchand gave the impression that Hindi literature of his era was full of peasants and rural issues, but, as Orsini points out, "he was almost an exception". See Francesca Orsini, 'Introduction', in *Raag Darbari*, 2012.
[2] Gopal Rai, *Hindī upanyās kā itihās* (Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 2002), 150.
[3] Jagdish Jha Vimal (b.1889) and Vishwanath Singh Sharma were among those who adopted social realism in representing the village of that time. For a brief introduction to the writers and their works, see Rai, 144, 150. Between Premchand's death in 1936 and independence in 1947, the focus in Hindi literature towards shifted back to social issues in the urban domain, including the status of women and widows and child marriage. Writers such as Jainendra Kumar (1905-1988), Bechan Sharma 'Ugra' (1900-1967), Yashpal (1903-1976), Sachchidananda Vatsyayan 'Agyeya' (1911-1987), and Rahul Sankrityayan (1893-1963), are among the most significant writers of this period. See Rai, 171–95.

Surinder Jodhka's words, "from 'book-view' to 'field-view'".[1] Ethnographic data became the primary source and foundation for writing about the village, infusing new possibilities and openness to village studies. These studies for the first time examined the village from a localised perspective and avoided the generalisations of colonial and nationalist thinkers and writers and corrected many stereotypes derived from the colonial era. For instance, opposing the myth of self-sufficiency, Andre Beteille asserted that "there is no reason to believe that the village was fully self-sufficient in the economic sphere… the village lacked many crafts which were necessary to its economy".[2] In addition, the social-anthropological studies of the 1950s and '60s also generated findings that deepened the understanding of the Indian village in terms of caste system and power structure, land distribution, gender, etc.[3] Caste, for instance, displayed more complex features at the village level. Not only did cooperation and reciprocal relationships across caste lines appear to a certain extent (embodying what Gandhi had conceived as village swaraj)[4], Srinivas also developed the concepts of "sanskritisation", "dominant caste" and "westernisation" that enriched the vocabulary and imagination of caste dynamics.[5]

[1] In this working paper, Jodhka overviews how the Indian village is constructed from colonial period to the era of post-independence. Interestingly and coincidentally, the year 1955 saw the inauguration and boom of Indian village studies. Srinivas published an edited collection of essays on village studies entitled *India's Villages*. The first volume of *Rural Profiles* by Majumdar was also released in 1955. And in the same year, Dube's study of a Telangana village with the title *Indian Village* also came out. Moreover, in his essay, Ed Simpson provides a comprehensive examination identifying the contributions of that group of anthropologists to the studies of the Indian village, see Simpson, 'Village Restudies'. Moreover, Archival fieldnotes obtained in the 1950s by anthropologists F. G. Bailey, David Pocock and Adrian Mayer examined by the SOAS-led village restudies project also constitute part of the achievements of the extensive on-the-spot investigations of post-independence period. F. G. Bailey, for instance, contributed two papers on Bisipada village in Odisha (Oriya, in the original title) to the collection *India's Villages* (1955), see F. G. Bailey, 'An Oriya Hill Village: I and II', in *India's Villages*, ed. M. N. Srinivas (London: Asia Publishing House, 1955), 122–46.
[2] Andre Beteille, *Caste, Class, and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village* (University of California Press, 1965), 136–37.
[3] See Jodhka, 'From "Book View" to "Field View"'.
[4] See S. C. Dube, 'A Deccan Village', in *India's Villages*, ed. M. N. Srinivas (London: J.K. Publishers, 1978), 202; M. N. Srinivas, *The Remembered Village* (University of California Press, 1976), 185.
[5] Srinivas, *The Remembered Village*.

The transition from "book view" to "field view" in the 1950s resonates with contemporaneous Hindi literary writing about the village, which was also characterised by a strong ethnographic tendency, but also a political edge. Commencing with the novel *Mailā Āṁcal* (*The Soiled Border*) by Phanishwarnath Renu in 1954, what became known as regionalism soon became a manifest literary trend in Hindi prose writing that continued throughout the 1960s.[1] By focusing on a specific region with abundant ethnographic details, Hindi regionalist writers registered a significant departure from Premchand's generic representation of the village. To take language as an example, the standard *Kharī Bolī* of *Godān* was replaced in *Mailā Āṁcal* by registers full of local flavour, which not only reflected heterogenous linguistic practices within the village, but also playfully enhanced the narrative by including songs, story-telling, and other performance texts, creating a unique aesthetics.[2] Arguably, this shift from social realism to regionalism in Hindi literature provides a close parallel to the transition from generic perspective to localised approach in social discourses. Both, I would suggest, displayed a strong urge to discover and represent the nation from the ground up. Premchand and regionalist writers, I argue, sought different political aims and thus utilised different types of literary realisms. Realism for Premchand meant raising social awareness and ultimately generating change, whereas regionalist realism aimed to view the workings of the newly established nation state from the perspective of socially embedded local actors. As Toral Gajarwala puts it,

[1] Later important regionalist works also include the satirical saga *Rāg Darbārī* (1968) and *Alag Alag Vaitarṇī* (1970), see Shrilal Shukla, *Rāg Darbārī* (Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 1968); Shivprasad Singh, *Alag Alag Vaitarṇī* (Lokbharti Prakashan, 1970).
[2] For an in-depth examination of the language usage in Renu's writing, see Kathryn Hansen, 'Renu's Regionalism: Language and Form', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 40, no. 02 (1981): 273–294.

> writers of anchalik sahitya attempted valiantly to produce a very particular form of the real—one, however, that capitalized on the village's actuality rather than its Gandhian potentiality.[1]

The bitterness of Premchand's realistic portrayals were replaced in regionalist representations of the village by playful orality, which in Renu's writings brought to the reader a joyful reading experience.[2] In her study on Renu's language usage, Hansen points out that Renu intentionally misspells words to match their pronunciation in the region that the writer focuses on—for instance, *bidāman*, for *vidvān*, scholar, and *istirī* for *strī*, woman—a strategy that aims to "play with the reader's perceptions of language, pointing a finger at the gap between what the ear hears and the eye sees".[3]

Gajarawala goes on to argue that "the ideology of regional literature was that of discovery; literary elaboration presented itself as one powerful means for articulation of the new and different."[4] Regionalist literary texts attempted to bring marginal regions into the imagination of an urban-centric nation building process. Despite their different political and ideological positions, both Renu's second novel *Partī Parikathā* (1958), Shivaprasad Singh's *Alag Alag Vaitarṇī* (1967), Bhairav Prasad Gupta's *Satī Maiyā kā Cauṛā* (1959), and Shrilal Shukla's *Rāg Darbāri* (1968) are all concerned with stifling village politics, local corruption, the (failure of) top-down state development, and the inability of a new generation of educated village youth to generate change.[5] The novels chronicled, to different degrees, local speech forms, caste dynamics, and oral traditions, but they also debated the present

[1] Toral Jatin Gajarawala, *Untouchable Fictions Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 103.
[2] See Bajrang Bihari Tiwari, 'Saṅgharṣśīljan Kī Kahāniyoṁ Kā Phalak', *Hans*, August 2006, 13.
[3] See Hansen, 'Renu's Regionalism'.
[4] Gajarawala, *Untouchable Fictions Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste*, 101.
[5] See Phanishwaranath Renu, *Partī Parikathā* (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 1982); Singh, *Alag Alag Vaitarṇī*; Bhairav Prasad Gupta, *Satī Maiyā Kā Caurā* (Allabahad: Lokbharti Prakashan, 2013); Shukla, *Rāg Darbārī*.

and future of the rural world in post-independent and post-zamindari abolition democratic India.

Yet Hindi critics tended to equate the city with modernity and village backwardness. In his book on Hindi regionalist writing, Indu Prakash Pandey, for instance, entitled one section of his analysis of *Mailā Āṁcal* "backwardness" and concluded that the village is simply ridden with "backwardness, corruption and ignorance".[1] This generic critical stance also made some village writers, such as Shivprasad Singh, reject the regionalist label.[2] I agree with Gajarawala's evaluation that regionalism was about the discovery of the new and different, but when she further argues that *āṁcalik sāhitya* displays an "overwhelming sense of nostalgia" and produces "a traditional India", I find her in line with Pandey's argument, placing the village and the city along a binary of traditional vs. modern.[3] Instead, I rather agree with Kathryn Hansen's assessment that Renu's novels demonstrate a deep concern for the *modernising* village—after all, *Mailā Āṁcal* described and discussed "caste politics" decades before political scientists![4] Renu's writings therefore do not identify the village with tradition but rather examine the relationship between tradition and modernity. His merit and success lie not merely in taking a region as the main subject matter, but in his capacity to integrate both traditional and modern consciousness in the thematic, linguistic and structural aspects of his novels.

With the rise of the New Story (*Naī Kahānī*) movement in the 1960s, regionalist writing focusing on rural domain as their main focus was gradually replaced by the more modernist and city-centred writing, which explored alienated,

[1] Indu Prakash Pandey, *Regionalism in Hindi Novels* (Steiner, 1974), 83–85.
[2] Orsini, 'Reading Together', 66–67.
[3] Gajarawala, *Untouchable Fictions Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste*, 107–8.
[4] "What happens when the values of a traditional culture are accosted by the opposing claims of modern science, or when the self-contained society of an Indian village is entered by political agents and officials representing urban-based power? Culture conflict, change, and adjustment occur. This is Renu's theme—not the static description of the region as an isolate", see Hansen, 'Phanishwarnath Renu', 215.

isolated and dissatisfied urban subjects.[1] The 1960s, '70s and '80s witnessed the gradual prevalence and dominance of this mode of writing in both Hindi literary production and the critical sphere.[2] But the scenario began to change with new social-economic circumstances from the 1990s and it is the major concern of this thesis.

The Indian Village and Hindi Village Writing in the Time of Neoliberal Globalisation

Post 1990, new economic policies with regard to trade, fiscal, licence regime and industrial protection have profoundly transformed socio-economic relations in the rural world.[3] The aim of contemporary discourses about the village has thus shifted from "discovering" the village in the 1950s to one of rediscovering and representing the crisis. In this section, I first lay out the how social scientists literature encapsulate the changing scenario of rural India, in particular he economic adversities that the village has been through in this era, and then shift my focus to Hindi literary world and elucidate its engagement with contemporary rural issues.

In his 2008 essay *Democracy and Economic Transformation in India*, Partha Chatterjee has pointed out three deep changes in rural society: first, the state is no longer an external entity but has now an established presence inside the village for several kinds of economic, social, and political provisions; second, small peasants no longer confront an exploiting landlord class but have adapted to availing themselves of resources from the state; third, farmers, especially among the young generations, are free to shift to urban and non-agricultural occupations and thus destabilise the

[1] Gordon Charles Roadarmel, 'The Theme of Alienation in the Modern Hindi Short Story' (PhD, University of California, Berkeley, 1969); Amardeep Singh, 'Progressivism and Modernism in South Asian Fiction: 1930–1970', *Literature Compass* 7, no. 9 (2010): 836–50.
[2] Richard Delacy, 'Politics, Pleasure and Cultural Production: Writing about Hindi Fiction in Post-Liberalization South Asia' (PhD, University of Chicago, 2013), 127.
[3] G. S. Bhalla and Gurmail Singh, 'Economic Liberalisation and Indian Agriculture: A Statewise Analysis', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2009, 34–44.

urban-rural equation.[1] Stressing the active role of the state in reversing the effects of global and corporate capital, Chatterjee has underscored the survival of the peasantry despite the new realities.[2] By contrast, observing the stagnation of the agrarian economy, the boom of non-farm rural employment and the outflow of rural population, Dipankar Gupta has proposed a radical overhaul in the understanding of rural society and culture and even has even spoken of the "vanishing village".[3] Given the ongoing attempts to form an in-depth account of the agrarian transition in contemporary India, it might still be too early for social scientists to predict the future of the village. Actually, Chatterjee could be overconfident of the government's capability for alleviation. For many, as the means of livelihood get diversified into rural non-farm employment[4] and circular migrant labour[5], there is a widespread disenchantment with farming-centred village life.[6] That poses a challenge to the long-standing cultural association between farming and rural identity. As we shall see in my further discussion, while Hindi writers tend to illustrate the negative sides of contemporary rural socio-economic relations, they are not as pessimistic as to speak of the dead end of the Indian village.

[1] Partha Chatterjee, 'Democracy and Economic Transformation in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2008, 53–62.
[2] See Partha Chatterjee, 'Classes, Capital and Indian Democracy', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2008. His assertion of the positive function of the developmental state is also supported by other studies, see Suryakant Waghmore, 'Rural Development: Role of State', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 20 July 2002; Shenggen Fan, Ashok Gulati, and Sukhadeo Thorat, 'Investment, Subsidies, and pro-Poor Growth in Rural India', *Agricultural Economics* 39, no. 2 (2008): 163–170.
[3] See Dipankar Gupta, 'Whither the Indian Village: Culture and Agriculture in "rural" India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2005, 751–758; D 'How Rural Is Rural India? Rethinking Options for Farming and Farmers', in *Handbook of Agriculture in India*, ed. Shovan Ray (OUP India, 2009), 207–91; 'The Importance of Being "Rurban"', *Economic and Political Weekly* 50, no. 24 (2015): 37–42.
[4] See Peter Lanjouw and Abusaleh Shariff, 'Rural Non-Farm Employment in India: Access, Incomes and Poverty Impact', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2004, 4429–4446.
[5] See Jan Breman, *Footloose Labour: Working in India's Informal Economy* (Cambridge University Press, 1996); Jan Breman, Isabelle Guérin, and Aseem Prakash, *India's Unfree Workforce: Of Bondage Old and New* (Oxford University Press, 2009); Jonathan P. Parry, 'Nehru's Dream and the Village "Waiting Room": Long-Distance Labour Migrants to a Central Indian Steel Town', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 37, no. 1–2 (2003): 217–49.
[6] Gupta, 'Whither the Indian Village'.

The inertia of agricultural growth impacts not only on the structure of rural economy but also has socio-cultural reprecussions. The fact that farming is no longer a secure or sustainable livelihood has triggered a dramatic agrarian crisis which has manifested itself in the upsurge of farmers' suicides.[1] Since the late 1990s, when farmers' suicides first attracted the media's attention, the topic has become a recurrent subject in Indian academia, in the attempt to understand the causes of the crisis and propose solutions through which this epidemic can be effectively contained.[2] Far from being merely an individual choice and decision, committing suicide on such a large scale among Indian farmers carries indications of broader social and economic dynamics.

Developmental discourse on Indian farmers' suicides tends to highlight farming-related economic reasons, such as high expenditure in seeds and pesticides, the failure of cash crops, and the inability to cope with market changes. Together, these factors create a chain reaction that finally leads to heavy indebtedness, the essential reason in the social scientific literature on farmers' suicides.[3] To understand the economic predicament of the Indian farmer, we should first shift the attention back to the early 1990s, a period when the Indian economy underwent deep

[1] See D. Narasimha Reddy and Srijit Mishra, 'Agriculture in the Reforms Regime', in *Agrarian Crisis in India*, ed. D. Narasimha Reddy and Srijit Mishra (Oxford University Press, 2010), 3–43; C. P. Chandrasekhar and Jayati Ghosh, *The Market That Failed: A Decade of Neoliberal Economic Reforms in India* (Leftword, 2002). For a more extensive investigation of the challenges faced in the Indian agricultural sector, see D. Narasimha Reddy and Srijit Mishra, eds., *Agrarian Crisis in India* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

[2] See, for instance, M Assadi, 'Farmers' Suicides: Signs of Distress in Rural Economy', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1998, 747; A. R. Vasavi, 'Agrarian Distress in Bidar: Market, State and Suicides', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1999, 2263–2268; A. R. Vasavi, 'Suicides and the Making of India's Agrarian Distress', *South African Review of Sociology* 40, no. 1 (2009): 94–108; B. B. Mohanty, '"We Are Like the Living Dead": Farmer Suicides in Maharashtra, Western India', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 32, no. 2 (2005): 243–76; R. S. Deshpande, 'Suicide by Farmers in Karnataka: Agrarian Distress and Possible Alleviatory Steps', *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 26 (2002): 2601–10; A. Vaidyanathan, 'Farmers' Suicides and the Agrarian Crisis', *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, no. 38 (2006): 4009–13.

[3] See, for instance, Mohanty, '"We Are Like the Living Dead"'; Surinder S. Jodhka, 'Beyond "Crises": Rethinking Contemporary Punjab Agriculture', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2006, 1530–1537; Balamuralidhar Posani, 'Farmer Suicides and the Political Economy of Agrarian Distress in India', *Development Studies Institute Working Paper Series*, no. 09–95 (2009).

structural shift and reconfiguration. The implementation of neoliberal economic policies marked the end of the "honeymoon period" between the Indian government and the agriculture sector, when the state supported agricultural growth during the Green Revolution period.[1] The absence of governmental backup delivered a heavy blow to the agriculture sector, leading to a chronic agrarian economic crisis. In comparison to other sectors, the growth in farming did not keep pace with the fast-growing overall GDP, and even witnessed a sharp deceleration in some states after the mid-1990s.[2] This predicament was further exacerbated by the open market promised as part of the neoliberal reform, which not only allowed cheap foreign cash crops to restrain the prices in the domestic market, but also introduced imported seeds and pesticides whose prices were disproportionate to the economic capacity of small peasants.[3] When farming is no longer a viable occupation, it is even difficult for a farmer household to meet basic daily consumption expenditure, and indebtedness becomes the only outcome.

The power structure in the village is also under significant reshuffle. Although Chatterjee rightly points out that small peasants no longer face a directly exploitative landlord class, he fails to consider the role of caste, a defect that has elicited criticism.[4] While the hierarchical gravity attached to caste may be weakening, caste has transformed into a decisive factor in local power relations in

[1] Reddy and Mishra, 'Agriculture in the Reforms Regime', 15. For a more comprehensive examination on the impact of India's Green Revolution on Indian agriculture, See Francine R. Frankel, *India's Green Revolution: Economic Gains and Political Costs* (Princeton University Press, 2015).
[2] C. P. Chandrasekhar, 'The Progress of "Reform" and the Retrogression of Agriculture', 2007, http://macroscan.net/pdfs/agriculture.pdf; Bhalla and Singh, 'Economic Liberalisation and Indian Agriculture'.
[3] See Vaidyanathan, 'Farmers' Suicides and the Agrarian Crisis'; Vandana Shiva, Ashok Emani, and Afsar H. Jafri, 'Globalisation and Threat to Seed Security: Case of Transgenic Cotton Trials in India', *Economic and Political Weekly* 34, no. 10/11 (1999): 601–13.
[4] See Mihir Shah, 'Structures of Power in Indian Society: A Response', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2008.

both social and political realms.[1] In the light of practices among Jats in western UP, Craig Jeffery, for instance, shows how caste has become a mobilising and organising force and an important form of social and symbolic capital in local political, economic and social life of rural north India.[2] More importantly, the mobilisation of lower-caste groups has posed a serious challenge to the established socio-political relations.[3] This can be primarily attributed to a changing economic scenario in which lower castes are no longer subject to agricultural bondage to upper-caste landowners.[4] One of the representative examples of Dalit political mobilisation has been the rise of Bahujan Samaj Party, primarily serving the Scheduled Caste communities, in Uttar Pradesh and its success in obtaining support from a wide range of the rural poor in this state.[5] In addition, the gender equation in the political field is gradually shifting thanks to the 1992 policy reserving seats for women in village panchayats.[6] Even though it has become a trend for rural women to get

[1] Oliver Mendelsohn, 'The Transformation of Authority in Rural India', *Modern Asian Studies* 27, no. 04 (1993): 805–842; C. J. Fuller, 'Introduction: Caste Today', in *Caste Today*, ed. C. J. Fuller, SOAS Studies on South Asia : Understandings and Perspectives (Oxford University Press, 1996), 1–31. A more recent paper from the SOAS village project however challenges the prominence of caste today, arguing that "caste has not gone away, but is usually overshadowed by the bold language and logic of everyday religious nationalism … the locus of incivility has shifted from caste to religion", see Simpson et al., 'A Brief History of Incivility in Rural Postcolonial India'.

[2] See Craig Jeffrey, 'Democratisation without Representation? The Power and Political Strategies of a Rural Elite in North India', *Political Geography* 19, no. 8 (2000): 1013–1036; Craig Jeffrey, '"A Fist Is Stronger than Five Fingers": Caste and Dominance in Rural North India', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 26, no. 2 (2001): 217–236.

[3] For comprehensive investigations on Dalit politics and mobilisation, see Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (Berkeley, US: University of California Press, 2009); Badri Narayan, *Fascinating Hindutva: Saffron Politics and Dalit Mobilisation* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2009).

[4] See Gupta, 'Whither the Indian Village', 753; Alpa Shah and Barbara Harriss-White, 'Resurrecting Scholarship on Agrarian Transformations', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 24 September 2011.

[5] Craig Jeffrey and Jens Lerche, 'Stating the Difference: State, Discourse and Class Reproduction in Uttar Pradesh, India', *Development and Change* 31, no. 4 (2000): 857–78; Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India* (Columbia University Press, 2003), 387–425; Ian Duncan, 'Dalits and Politics in Rural North India: The Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 27, no. 1 (1999): 35–60.

[6] Raghabendra Chattopadhyay and Esther Duflo, 'Women as Policy Makers: Evidence from a Randomized Policy Experiment in India', *Econometrica* 72, no. 5 (2004): 1409–43; Lori Beaman et al., 'Political Reservation and Substantive Representation: Evidence from Indian Village Councils', in *India Policy Forum 2010-11*, ed. Suman Bery, Barry Bosworth, and Arvind Panagariya (SAGE Publications India, 2011).

education, their subjugated position in the household has yet to significantly change.[1] The recent emergence of self-help groups has demonstrated positive signs in bringing about changes in the lives of rural women.[2] Feminist discourse in India has also recognised the intersection between caste and gender, positing a separate category for Dalit women who face patriarchal dominance on both accounts; this is pertinent to the experiences of Dalit women in rural contexts.[3]

Contrary to the claim of some Hindi critics that the village is disappearing from Hindi literature,[4] my fieldwork in India reveals that there is still a comparatively rich and variegated corpus of writing on the village in Hindi, exploring political, caste, gender and economic struggles in the post-1990 era.[5] I agree with the opinion of Gaurinath, the editor of the *Hans* August 2006 special issue on "*saṁgharṣśīl āmjan*" (struggling common people), that the theme of the village is far from vanishing in Hindi literature, although some keep reinforcing this false impression and chant an elegy for the village in Hindi literature.[6] Both mainstream literary magazines and publishing houses continue to publish works focusing on the village, and Hindi village writing actually enjoys a considerable readership.[7] The works I analyse in the thesis are available in university and local

[1] See Roger Jeffery and Patricia Jeffery, *Population, Gender and Politics: Demographic Change in Rural North India* (Cambridge University Press, 1997).
[2] Jairam Ramesh, 'Self-Help Groups Revolution: What Next?', *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 36 (2007): 3621–24; Meera Tiwari, 'Didi of Rural Bihar: Real Agent of Change?', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2010.
[3] See Gopal Guru, 'Dalit Women Talk Differently', *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, no. 41/42 (1995): 2548–50; Anupama Rao, ed., *Gender and Caste* (New Delhi: Kali for Women in association with the Book Review Literary Trust, 2003).
[4] See Tiwari, 'Saṅgharṣśīljan Kī Kahāniyoṁ Kā Phalak'; Jyotish Joshi, 'Gāṁv Ke Yathārth Se Paricit Karātā Saṁkalan', *Hans*, December 2007, 95.
[5] In 2016, I spent two months in India visiting authors, critics, and publishers and looking through magazine archives to explore the current situation of contemporary Hindi village writing and decide which texts to be included in my thesis.
[6] Gaurinath, 'Ham Kis Din Ke Intazār Meṁ Haiṁ?', *Hans*, August 2006.
[7] Mainstream Hindi literary magazines include *Hans*, *Pahal*, *Naya Jnanoday* and *Tadbhav*. The monthly *Hans* serves as the largest platform for publishing village short stories, partly because it is still the most widely published literary magazine (5000 copies per month) and because of its openness to themes. Publishing houses, such as Rajkamal, Vani, Bhartiya Jnanpith and Antika, continue to

libraries and can be easily purchased from book dealers and online; some have had several editions. It is therefore misleading to claim the marginalised position of Hindi village writing.

In fact, the writers I cover in this thesis, such as Maitreyi Pushpa, Shivmurti and Sanjeev, continue to be active and influential voices in the present-day Hindi literary sphere. They enjoy a wide readership and have already received considerable critical attention because of their consistent engagement with the village throughout their literary careers (I provide detailed introduction to the writers in the chapters). Their works have been published by the most acclaimed Hindi publishing houses, such as Rajkamal and Vani, and they have been regular contributors to mainstream Hindi literary magazines.[1] Some of Maitreyi Pushpa's novels, such as *Cāk* (The Potter's Wheel, 1997) and *Almā Kabūtarī* (2000), have been reprinted at least five times, an uncommon achievement among contemporary Hindi writers which testifies to her popularity among Hindi readers. Shivmurti shot to fame when his long short story *Tiriyā Carittar* (The Fallen Woman) was published by *Hans* in 1987, and this story has remained one of the readers' all-time favourite ever since. With regard to critical reception, there have been at least two edited volumes of literary criticism and several monographs dedicated to Maitreyi Pushpa's works, and three Hindi literary magazines have published special issues on Shivmurti, with interviews and critical articles.[2] Sanjeev is regarded as one of the leading writers of the post-1980

publish village-oriented novels and short story collections. Antika, a newly founded publishing house by Gaurinath after leaving *Hans*, has helped some lesser known writers to publish their works on the village.

[1] Maitreyi Pushpa's *Almā Kabūtarī* (2000) was published by Rajkamal Prakashan. Shivmurti's *Tarpaṇ* was first serialised in *Tadbhav*, a reclaimed Hindi literary magazine in 2002, and then republished by Jnanpith in 2004. Sanjeev's *Phāṁs* was published by Vani Prakash in 2015. Besides, they all regularly publish their short stories and non-fictional articles in the Hindi literary magazines listed a previous footnote.

[2] The two edited volumes are Daya Dikshit, ed., *Maitreyī Pushpā: Tathya Aur Satya* (New Delhi: Samayik Books, 2010); Vijay Bahadur Singh, ed., *Maitreyī Pushpā: Strī Hone Kī Kathā* (New Delhi: Kitabghar Prakashan, 2011). For the monographs, see, for instance, Uttambhai Patel, *Maitreyī Pushpā aur unkā Jhūlā naṭ* (Rohatak: Shanti Prakashan, 2009); Suma Rao, *Maitreyī Pushpā Ke Upanyāsoṃ Meṃ Mānavīya Saṃvedanā* (Delhi: Lok Prashan Ghar, 2010); Kiran Popakar, *Maitreyī Pushpā Kā*

Hindi generation by the infuencial Hindi critic Gopal Rai, and a whole edited volume of criticism dedicated solely to his novel *Phāṁs* appeared in 2018.[1] In addition, some of their works I discuss in the thesis have been translated into non-Indian languages to access an international readship—Maiteryi Pushpa's *Almā Kabūtarī* has been translated into English;[2] a German translation of Shivmurti's *Tarpaṇ* is about to be published.[3]

Like the social scientists, contemporary Hindi writers on the village tend to engage closely and reflect on the new socio-economic conditions; they are particularly concerned with gender and caste politics. Against the backdrop of globalisation and urbanisation, some Hindi literary writing on the village tends to highlight the trauma and deleterious effects of the global capitalism, which accelerates the decay and crisis in the rural domain exposed to the world market. Two short stories *Tilesarī* (2002) and *Maṁsā Baṛhaī* (2002) I analyse in Chapter 4 highlight the vulnerability to market competition of petty commodity producers in the village. In Chapter 3 I discuss the novel *Phāṁs* thematised on the severe agrarian crisis and the issue of farmers' suicides. Instead of having an active state to rein in the spiral of suicides, *Phāṁs* imagines a self-help brainstorm conference organised by villagers who take the initiative. Out-migration and the hollowing out of the village as consequences of urbanisation were already a theme of earlier Hindi village writing, such as Shivprasad Singh's novel *Alag Alag Vaitarṇī* (1967),[4] but I have

Kathā Sāhitya: Strī Vimarś (Delhi: Gaur Publish, 2011); Santosh Pavaar, *Maitreyī Pushpā Ke Upanyāsoṃ Meṃ Nārī* (Kanpur: Vidya Prakashan, 2012). For Shivmurti, see *Mañch*, issue Jan-Mar 2011; *Lamhī*, issue Oct-Dec 2012; *Saṃved*, issue Feb-Apr 2014.

[1] See Rai, *Hindī upanyās kā itihās*, 375–76; Gopal Rai, *Hindī Kahāni Kā Itihās-3 (1976-2000)*, vol. 3 (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 2011), 221–25.; Sanjay Nawale, ed., *Kisān-Ātmhatyā: Yathārth Aur Vikalp (Phāṁs Upanyās Kā Sandarbh)* (New Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 2018).

[2] See Maitreyi Pushpa, *Alma Kabutari*, trans. Raji Narasimham (New Delhi: Katha, 2006).

[3] This is according to the writer, Shivmurti.

[4] Singh, *Alag Alag Vaitarṇī*. For an examination of this novel, see Orsini, 'Reading Together'.

found only one relevant story in the contemporary corpus about this phenomenon,[1] in contrast to the attention paid to migrating labour in development studies. Contrary to the argument that the village is dying out, Hindi writers seem to have faith in the capability of the village to survive.

Contemporary Hindi village writing also addresses caste relations, particularly the question of Dalits, and explores the rise of Dalits and their redefinition of the rural power structure. Beside the discrimination and brutality experienced by lower-caste men and women, the focus of the representation is gradually shifting to struggle, resistance and mobilisation, showing assertive Dalits who follow the path of Dalit consciousness. In Chapter 2, I examine two novels that focus on the struggles of contemporary rural Dalits for social equality and dignity, Jai Prakash Kardam's *Chappar* (1994) and Shivmurti's *Tarpaṇ* (2004). The theme of communalism and religious tension that was prominent in the 1966 novel *Ādhā Gāṁv* by Rahi Masum Raza appears missing in the contemporary corpus, perhaps in line with the declining number of Muslim writers in Hindi.[2] Rather, Hindi writers tend to approach gender dynamics in association with caste relations and focus on the experiences of low-caste women who negotiate the two-fold dominance with courage and assertion to womanhood. Strong and assertive women characters are a mainstay of contemporary village writing, as we shall see in *Muṭṭhī meṁ Gāṁv* (*The village in hand*, 1996) and *Almā Kabūtarī* (2000).

Exploring how non-literary discourses inform Hindi village writing and showing how the latter expands our understanding of the village, the aim of this comparison is, however, not to treat the rural texts on a par with social documents,

[1] Ramkumar Tiwari, 'The Coming of the Qutub', in *Katha Prize Stories*, ed. Geeta Dharmarajan and Nandita Aggarwal, vol. 10 (Katha, 2000). This story was first published on *Pahal 60* in Hindi under the title *Relgāṛī ke Āgmān se*.
[2] See Rahi Masoom Raza, *Ādhā Gāṃv* (Akshar Prakashan, 1966). David Landau's ongoing PhD project on Muslim writers and their works in Hindi at SOAS, University of London also reveals that the village is a theme rarely touched in contemporary Muslim Hindi writings.

though most Hindi literary works conform to a realist narrative paradigm. In the next section, I turn to issues of literary mediation to show how representation and positionality must inform our readings of these literary works.

Representation, Reality, Representativeness and Positionality

Who represents the village today? The question of representation concerns both the selection and arrangement of elements to create a picture or a story, but also the relationship between the person who represents and those who are represented. Gayatri Spivak usefully distinguishes between *Vertretung* ("stepping in someone's place") and *Darstellung* ("placing there").[1] In terms of *Vertretung,* although writers writing about the village today are mostly urban middle class living in the city, which provides them with the access to the publishing and distributing network, they maintain a strong connection with the rural world—they originally come from a rural background and return to the village on a frequent basis.[2] Straddling both the rural and urban domains, these writers perform the role of mediators who construct and represent the rural world to a majorly urban readership. But while writing from first-hand experiences strengthens their "legitimacy" in representing the village, it also raises the question of *their* gaze on the village. In some cases, their gaze comes remarkably close to an outsider's "ethnographic gaze", as in the description of urban *bastī* Dalits in Jai Prakash Kardam's *Chappar* discussed in Chapter 2. Elsewhere, the narrative guides the reader into little known localities, as in Maitreyi Pushpa's *Almā Kabūtarī* discussed in Chapter 1. Moreover, since village narratives are often about

[1] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (University of Illinois Press, 1988); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Sarah Harasym, 'Practical Politics of The Open End', in *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 95–112.
[2] In the short story collection *Kathā meṁ Gāṁv*, for instance, the authors' profiles provided before each short story indicate that all contributing authors were born in the village, see Subhash Chandra Kushwaha, ed., *Kathā meṁ Gāṁv: Bhāratīya gāṁvoṁ kā Badaltā Yathārth* (Mumbai: Samvad Prakashan, 2006).

exploitation and distress, they raise the question of what affective reaction they demand from readers—is it sympathy, empathy, or solidarity? While sympathy has received much criticism, particularly in postcolonial theory for othering and diminishing its "object"[1], in several of the texts I discuss sympathy as the beginning for advantaged characters of relating differently to marginalised characters, for example Rajini to the village Dalits in Kardam's *Chappar.* In other cases, empathy, i.e. "the the ability to understand and share the feelings of another"[2] is what is demanded of the readers. In *Phaṁs*, discussed in Chapter 3, the novel lingers on the farmers' suffering and the detailed and dramatic depiction of their deaths—this is not to sensationalise their deaths but to force readers to confront their predicament. This strategy contrasts sharply with the understatement of other cases such as Deepa Bhatia's documentary *Nero's Guests.*

As for *Darstellung,* realism has been an important category to evaluate Hindi village writing. Both Premchand's social realism and Renu's regionalism foregrounded the pursuit of authenticity and their works have been treated by Hindi critics as accounts reflecting reality. For example, in his *Hindī Upanyās kā Itihās* (*History of the Hindi novel,* 2002), Hindi critic Gopal Rai effusively celebrates Renu's realistic portrayal of the village in *Mailā Āṁcal* in relation to the extreme backwardness and poverty of the border area of Purnea after independence.[3] In other words, instead of examining their narrative techniques and literary aesthetics, those texts have been more often than not reduced to mirrors of the rural world, and their degree of reliability has become the criterion for evaluating them, thanks to the "legitimacy" of village writers. However, it is not the reality *per se* but the way

[1] See, for instance, Amit Rai, *Rule of Sympathy: Sentiment, Race, and Power 1750–1850* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2002); Mike Marais, 'Violence, Postcolonial Fiction and the Limits of Sympathy', *Studies in the Novel* 43, no. 1 (2011): 94–114; Thomas J. McCarthy, *Relationships of Sympathy: The Writer and the Reader in British Romanticism* (Scolar Press, 1997).
[2] See the definition of empathy, Angus Stevenson, *Oxford Dictionary of English* (OUP Oxford, 2010).
[3] See Rai, *Hindī upanyās kā itihās*, 243.

representation is constructed that should attract our attention. This, as I have already mentioned, includes characterisation, plotting, focalisation, choices of genre, and the narrative function of spatial and temporal elements.[1]

Not unusually, fictional texts employ multiple focalisation to show the motivations and worldviews of different characters. This shifting focalisation, which may take the form of first-person internal monologue or third-person "character zone"[2], is especially visible in *Almā Kabūtarī* in Chapter 1 and Shivmurti's *Tarpaṇ* (*The Offering*) in Chapter 2. Although narrators are extra-diegetic in fiction about Dalits, too, focalisation highlights the different kinds of representations. In *Chappar* (*The Thatched Roof*) the focalisation stays with the Dalit protagonist, whereas in *Tarpaṇ* it takes a seemingly neutral stance and moves between Dalit and high-caste characters. This in fact, I argue, is the biggest difference between Shivmurti's novel and Kardam's—though both of them deal with the question of Dalit mobilisation and politicisation, Shivmurti's devotes almost as much narrative space to the anxieties and strategies of the Brahmin characters. This shows that Dalit mobilisation and struggle for *izzat* or dignity forces upper castes, too, to mobilise to protect their own *izzat*. When representing the Kabutaras, an ex-criminal tribe and *de facto* Dalit community, *Almā Kabūtarī* also introduces shifting focalisation, but here, unlike in *Tarpaṇ*, it helps highlight the polarised image of the tribe in the eyes of both themselves as a heroic community with a glorious past, and in the eyes of high-caste people, for whom they are contemptible and inferior criminals. In *Phāṁs*, the

[1] For more on the theory of representation and narratological elements, see, for instance, Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton University Press, 2013); Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Cornell University Press, 1983); Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

[2] "Character zone" for Bakhtin refers to "the field of action for a character's voice" which extends "beyond the boundaries of the direct discourse allotted to him". M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Michael Holquist, University of Texas Press Slavic Series, no. 1 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 316, 320.

narrator takes an outsider's point of view and reports the situation of farmers' suicides on a case-by-case basis, providing a panoramic view of the agrarian crisis.

The ways in which characters are chosen and depicted are thus closely linked to the political agenda and aesthetics of literary texts. In Chapter 1 I focus particularly on characterisation and show that the narrative space devoted to the inner world of the characters from the Kabutara community contradicts the upper castes' dismissive view of them. I also show how an ideal lineage is created between the three main women characters, in ideal affiliation to the community's ancestor Rani Padmini. Finally, I show how the author Maitreyi Pushpa, famous for her strong feminist stance, traces different character arcs for her female and male characters.

In her examination of Hindi Dalit writing, Laura Brueck has proposed the "good Dalits and bad Brahmins" paradigm to characterise how Dalit writers employ a highly polarised, melodramatic characterisation of Dalit and upper-caste characters in order to solicit from the reader moral alignment with the Dalit characters against the upper-caste villains.[1] Although this narrative paradigm is still relevant to Dalit representations in village texts, I discover multiple arrangements of characters that tend to complicate the picture, destabilising established Dalit narrative politics and aesthetics.[2] In the self-proclaimed Dalit novel *Chappar*, for example, while all the Dalit characters embody morally pure psychic integrity characterised by mutual support and common resistance, the "bad Brahmins" paradigm is challenged by the sympathetic upper-caste young woman who offers constant help to a suffering Dalit

[1] See Laura Brueck, 'Good Dalits and Bad Brahmins: Melodramatic Realism in Dalit Short Stories', *South Asia Research* 30, no. 2 (2010): 125–144; Laura Brueck, *Writing Resistance: The Rhetorical Imagination of Hindi Dalit Literature* (Columbia University Press, 2014), 84–86.
[2] Here, I refer to Alex Woloch's conceptualisation of character-system, which indicates "the arrangement of … differentiated configurations and manipulations of the human figure—into a unified narrative structure", see Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 14.

couple in contrast to her intimidating landlord father; but even he at the end of the novel comes to realise his past misdeeds towards Dalits. This deployment of characters in *Chappar*, I argue, aims to convey a reformist Dalit ideology embodied in the narrative. Unlike *Chappar, Tarpaṇ*, a novel set in a village in the era of Dalit assertion discussed in the same chapter, bluntly delineates the conflict of interest within the Dalit community over a dispute with high castes, questioning the "good Dalits" paradigm and cracking the image of a unified Dalit community. The short story *Śavyātrā* (*The Funeral Procession*) I discuss in chapter 4 further thematises intra-Dalit discrimination, where high-ranking Dalits victimise their inferiors. All the Dalit-oriented texts suggest that the image of Dalits in contemporary narratives has registered a fundamental change from that in Premchand's imaginations of the village, demonstrating explicit rebellious spirit.

As for plotting, to remain with *Phāṁs*, I argue that its fragmented structure works to provide a panoramic view of the agrarian crisis and reject the media narrative that farmers' suicides are caused by indebtedness. The self-organised conference in the second half of the novel provides an imaginary solution to the problem and puts forward the idea that only the villagers' own initiative will tackle the crisis. Jai Prakash Kardam's novel *Chappar* follows Premchand's model in structuring the plot along parallel urban and rural subplots. Unlike other Dalit texts on the village, the two spaces and subplots also run in parallel, and the reformist campaign that sweeps through the city reaches also the village. *Almā Kabūtarī* instead is a sprawling family saga spanning three generations of the Kabutara community. Revolving around the three main female characters forming a lineage, the plotline gradually expands to include subplots of other characters related to the trio.

Besides, the village as the main setting of the texts serves as the platform which informs the ways other narrative elements play out. In addition to viewing the village as a whole, I also examine the narrative functions of recurrent spatial elements that constitute the rural setting. As for the spatial elements and how they work narratively in village texts, my understanding derives from Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the "chronotope", to which I now turn.

The Chronotope of the Village

My treatment of contemporary representations of the village partly draws from what Mikhail Bakhtin conceives of chronotope, a concept that accommodates the combination of spatiality and temporality (*chronos*+*topos*), which, in Bakhtin's own term, serves as "the place where knots of narrative are tied and untied".[1] The chronotope in prose fiction informs the ways in which literary representations are patterned—through perspective, plot, setting, characters and other narrative components—and how these patterns help advance the action and convey theme and content. My analyses of village texts focus on these elements and examine the ways in which they are organised and deployed in the narratives to convey meanings. More importantly, thanks to the "relative typological stability" of the chronotope, indicating its recurrence and continuity, it breaks textual boundaries and brings together different texts which thematically focus on different aspects of the village under this analytical framework.[2]

In other words, how do these different texts together create a chronotope of the village in Hindi? In his illustration of the chronotope of the road, which often carries symbolic overtones, for instance, Bakhtin suggests that it characterises plots

[1] M. M. Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (University of Texas Press, 2010), 250.
[2] Bakhtin, 85.

imbued with random encounters and chance events involving varied people.[1] In medieval romance, these plots take place in "empty time", which results in the completely unchanged characters even after they go through all the unexpected encounters.[2] The unchanged nature of characters, according to Bakhtin, affirms their stable identity, durability and resistance to changing situations.[3] The road chronotope also works in the genre of Bildungsroman, which, in contrast to medieval romance, is characterised by the development of characters in the course of the journey.[4] Another example Bakhtin gives is the provincial town in nineteenth-century novels, where the cyclical narrative time seems to stand still and highlight the absence of significant "events", "energy" and "advancing historical development".[5]

Extending Bakhtin's concept, Margaret Cohen has identified the "chronotope of the sea" by analysing the narrative patterns of maritime novels, where the organisation of plot and characters is informed by nautical tropes. So, as with the road chronotope narratives featuring the "blue water" are propelled by the lawlessness of the open sea, which charges the plot development with implausible, "strange and therefore true" events, such as sudden catastrophic storms, in defiance of expectation and causality.[6] Overwhelming as they seem to the reader, these extreme moments can be successfully handled by protagonists, who understand the arbitrary nature and demonstrate heroism, invoking Nietzsche's superman.[7] In contrast to the uncontrolled and brutal open ocean, the island usually has a temperate environment, an ideal place to be transformed into an society by the capable

[1] Bakhtin, 243–44.
[2] Bakhtin, 91.
[3] Bakhtin, 107.
[4] See M. M. Bakhtin, 'The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel)', in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (University of Texas Press, 1986), 10–59.
[5] Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel', 247–48.
[6] Margaret Cohen, 'The Chronotopes of the Sea', in *The Novel: Forms and Themes*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton University Press, 2006), 650–52.
[7] Cohen, 654.

characters with their survival skills.[1] Thanks to its isolation from the main society, the time of island-centred narratives begins from zero and then becomes repetitive as in the provincial towns.[2]

Drawing inspirations from Bakhtin and Cohen, I have tried to identify a "village chronotope" manifested in the varied themes and tropes of contemporary Hindi village writing.[3] This chronotope includes spatial coordinates that inform the development of narrative and are recurrent across different texts and narrative forms. As Bakhtin suggests, chronotopic motifs are flexible in scale and mutual relationships, so these coordinates can either structure an entire text or only a part of it.[4] I provide a chronotopic reading in chapter 4 of two short stories, *Kāmyāb* (*Successful*) by Hari Bhatnagar and *Māgh kī Rāt* (*Feburary Night*, 2004) by Vasudev, where the motif—the road and the bonfire (*alāo*)—structures the entire narrative. Another chronotopic element, the Dalit *bastī* (settlement), features in both *Tarpaṇ* and *Almā Kabūtarī*, though they also contain other spatial coordinates that contribute to their plotlines and characterisation. The road is also a common motif in contemporary Hindi village writing, where the personality, values and agency of characters are tested through their reactions: while in *Kāmyāb* the road signifies the unnamed urban narrator's unpleasant journey to the village, in *Almā Kabūtarī* it marks the unhappy journeys of the main characters between the village, the larger village, and the district town. In *Almā Kabūtarī*, the journeys of Rana and Alma have divergent effects on the two characters. When Rana moves from his own village to a nearby village, where he lives with Alma and Ram Singh, he is deeply confused and paralysed by what he sees unexpectedly of Ram Singh's betrayal of his own

[1] Cohen, 659.
[2] Cohen, 660.
[3] The village chronotope should not be confused with Bakhtin's provincial chronotope mentioned previously, characterised by its pastoral serenity and static nature.
[4] Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel', 252.

community. By comparison, although Alma is violently trafficked by local dacoits from one place to another, she never loses her agency during the adversity and finally surprisingly emerges as a strong female leader. In *Kāmyāb* the chance encounters on the road also include animals—a monkey and a donkey—which I read as symbolic of rural subjects. Before going to the village, the narrator in *Kāmyāb* is confident that this is going to be an easy and successful trip as he has experienced more difficult ones. It turns out to be the opposite, and this experience fundamentally alters his perception of the village.

The doorway (*dahlīj*) functions as a liminal space for unexpected meetings, union or conflict and frames a "chronotope of encounter" that bears resemblance to Bakhtin's chronotope of the threshold, characterised by its combination with "the motif of encounter … and of crisis and break in a life."[1] The old female protagonist in the short story *Būṛhī* (1998) by Ratankumar Sambhariya, for instance, finally meets her long-anticipated daughter at the doorway of her house. It is this particular combination of place and time that marks a dramatic turn of the story. Putting an end to the story, the meeting counters the reader's expectation that Burhi could have become extremely disappointed and helpless after her arduous preparations in a scorching day, if the daughter does not show up at all. The doorway thus serves as a significant break point for the dead end and leads to a happy ending in terms of narrative structure, when the rest of the narrative has set the tone for a tragic closure. In another context, the doorway serves as the last liminal boundary between different groups which are supposed to remain separate. Encounters taking place in the doorway can also take on meanings of boundary transgression and dissolution. In *Muṭṭhī meṁ Gāṁv* (1996) by S. R. Harnot, when the male character Moti steps into the doorway of the village headman, this signifies undue deference, conformity, and

[1] Bakhtin, 248.

the willingness to be manipulated. By contrast, the confrontation at the doorway between Moti's wife Mangli and the village headman can be read as a transgressive act of defiance that provides the climax to the story and marks the departure of Mangli from a past of oppression, whatever the future consequences may be. The doorway is also the place where the first-person narrator meets unexpectedly the craftsman-turned-gun dealer Mansa in Punni Singh's short story *Mansā Baṛhaī* (2002). The sudden arrival of Mansa peddling the home-made guns definitely surprises the narrator. While it does not involve boundary transgression, through the perspective of the narrator, the encounter at the doorway reveals that Mansa is forced to make guns as his traditional craft as a blacksmith is no longer needed by the villagers given the changed economic circumstances.

Since caste division remains a crucial axis in rural narratives, spatial motifs drawing caste boundaries but also complicating the dynamics are crucial chronotopic elements. In both *Almā Kabūtarī*, *Tarpaṇ*, and *Chappar* spatial separation based on the principles of cleanness and touchability between lower and upper castes is prominent—whether inside the village, in the home, in government offices, police station, or at school. The school, for instance, is a recurrent site of discrimination against low-caste children where they are not allowed to have equal access to common facilities, such as the water tap. Rana's experience in *Almā Kabūtarī*, when he is not allowed to drink from the communal tap, reminds the reader of Omprakash Valmiki's description of a similar scene in his autobiography *Jūṭhan* (1997). For the low-caste, school time is usually imbued with memories of humiliation and bullies, serving as a significant moment in the process of their identity formation. Interestingly, *Chappar* instead firmly asserts that the school, and education in a broader sense, can play a key role in realising Dalit *cetnā* (consciousness), which is necessary to generate ultimate social change.

Dalits live in their own *bastī* (settlement) on the periphery of the main village occupied by upper or middle castes. But, the narratives show, this seemingly rigid boundary is actually porous and allows acts of crossing that propel the plot. Usually crossing this boundary triggers a violent confrontation or develops into displaying prowess, as we shall see in *Tarpaṇ*, where the Dalits protest in the village against a Brahmin's offence, and in return, the Brahmin comes to their *bastī* with a gun to exhibit his power. By comparison, in *Almā Kabūtarī* the high-caste people cross the spatial boundary to patronise the *ṭhekā* (liquor shop) run by the Kabutaras, a site for secret pleasures and a shelter for the high castes as well as a site of commercial prosperity for the Kabutara community.

In addition, common spaces outside the living area of the village, such as the field and the forest, also allow inter-caste encounters to take place, which are usually dangerous moments for lower-caste female characters facing high-caste men. We encounter such scenes in both *Tarpaṇ* and *Phāṁs*, where low-caste girls are subject to sexual threat.

The police have a complex role in Dalit-centred texts. Normally they align with upper castes to intimidate the low-caste, as in *Almā Kabūtarī*, and the *thānā* (police station) is a site of humiliation for Dalits when seeking help. But in *Tarpaṇ*, in addition to a place where Dalits endure discrimination and intimidation, the *thānā* becomes a testing ground of social clout for both Dalits and upper castes—the power of the police can be availed by each party to deter their rivals. In this novel, both parties expand their battleground to include the market road, which has a special function as a site of public exposure where the Brahmins strive to hide their humiliation from the public, whereas the Dalits show off their triumph.

The chronotope of the village consisting of various spatial coordinates plays a significant role in structuring narrative patterns of contemporary Hindi village

writing. It also serves as a link that demonstrates the inner connections between the texts and brings them together under this framework.

Chapter Outline

The aim of my study is not to define a canon of contemporary Hindi village writing, but rather to illuminate and provide a critical review of representations of the village. In doing so, I am aware of the tension between the large corpus of Hindi village writing produced in the post-liberalisation era and the constraints of selection. My selection has been guided partly by the acclaim that these writers and works have already received in Hindi literary circles—indeed some of the writers, such as Maitreyi Pushpa and Sanjeev, have already achieved canonical status and won significant literary prizes. My other criterion has been thematic range and engagement—I have chosen works of what I consider significant writers who make critical interventions in debates on rural gender dynamics, caste and Dalit questions, and the agrarian predicament.

My case studies over four main chapters are organised along form, genre and thematic concerns. I begin with perhaps the most famous and celebrated village writer in contemporary Hindi, Maitreyi Pushpa, and focus on her novel *Almā kabūtarī* (2000) which takes the Kabutaras, a former criminal tribe, as its theme. I emphasise the way in which Pushpa constructs a unique and positive identity for the community through an alternative heroic and glorious history that echoes Dalit historical discourse. In addition, as I have already suggested, I argue that characterisation plays a central role in the writer's gender politics. Male and female characters are represented differently in the novel: male characters are compliant but crushed by the violent police-politicians nexus, whereas female characters are survivors despite equally daunting adversity and become potential agents to generate transformation for the community.

Dalit mobilisation is one of the main themes of contemporary Hindi literature. In chapter 2 I turn to examine the representation of Dalits in the village by juxtaposing two short novels, *Chappar* (1994) by the Dalit writer Jai Prakash Kardam and *Tarpaṇ* (2004) by the non-Dalit Shivmurti. I suggest that the positionality of the authors informs their perspective and the devices they use. While Chappar invariably focalises on the Dalit characters and aims to convey Dalit ideology, *Tarpaṇ* adopts a neutral perspective and provides a blow-by-blow account of a confrontation between mobilising Dalits and an upper-caste alliance. I argue that unlike the utopian reconciliation of caste conflicts projected in *Chappar*, *Tarpaṇ* showcases in a realist manner the ongoing Dalit resistance in the post-Dalit assertion era when the conflict has become about honour and dignity (*izzat*).

Chapter 3 examines Sanjeev's novel *Phāṁs* (2015) which, as already mentioned, deals with the theme of farmers' suicides and offers a detailed account of the current social-economic challenges farmers are facing. By focusing on a non-Hindi-speaking region, I argue that the novel pushes the boundary of Hindi regionalism. Although the novel is written in standard Hindi, the narrator employs non-fictional elements, local expressions and real toponyms to enhance the realistic flavour. I am particularly attentive to the way in which the plot is structured in fragmentary form, but at the same time how it differs from social scientific discourses through its detailed characterisation. I argue that its fragmented structure aims to provide a panoramic view of the agrarian crisis, rejecting the generic narrative that farmers' suicides are caused by indebtedness. The self-organised brainstorm conference in the second half of the novel, in which farmers from other parts of India narrate their stories of distress and find ways of alleviation, I suggest, confirms the suggestion that it will be the villagers' initiative that will deal with the crisis.

I finish in Chapter 4 with a broad survey of short stories, a genre with a long and distinguished pedigree in Hindi in which writers are experimenting with different imaginations of the village.[1] I use the collection *Kathā meṁ Gāṁv* (2006) to navigate through to the vast corpus of stories on the village. I argue that this collection demonstrates the urgent effort to draw the Hindi readers' attention back to the rural world, though the editor Subhash Chandra Kushwaha's claim that the cry of the village has been ignored by the outside world is, as I have suggested earlier, debatable. My examination suggests that the three main themes that I focus on in village writing remain significant in the short story genre.

In her study of the 20th century English village writing of India and Sri Lanka, Anupama Mohan argues that

> writers in the Indian subcontinent have shown a strong tendency towards conceptualizing the rural and the village within the dichotomous paradigms of utopia and dystopia. Such representations have consequently cast the village in idealized (pastoral) or in realist (counter-pastoral/dystopic) terms.[2]

My readings of contemporary Hindi village writing nuance the picture. I argue that contemporary rural utopia concerns mainly about the reconciliation of caste conflicts, as in *Chappar*, where it is achieved through inter-caste cooperation and mutual respect. Rather than at the two ends of the utopia-dystopia spectrum, most representations of the village should be positioned in between. While the representations of the village in the texts I examine are unremittingly critical and do not shy away from violence, exploitation, and injustice, they never "give up" on the village as a dystopian space. Rather, they point towards the dynamic forces at play in

[1] The short story is significant because many writers such as H. R. Harnot and Subash Chandra Kushwaha only write short stories and literary journals are the main platform where they publish their works.

[2] Anupama Mohan, *Utopia and the Village in South Asian Literatures* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 3. The author uses Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* (1909) and Raja Rao's Kanthapura as case studies of the Indian utopias, whereas taking Leonard Woolf's *The village in the Jungle* (1913) as the prominent example of a dystopia in Sri Lanka.

the village that produce a more mixed picture. In *Almā Kabūtarī*, for instance, after the establishment of the licensed liquor shop that provides the Kabutaras with a lawful livelihood and hence commercial prosperity, the village gradually changes from a dangerous and exploitative place for the community to a livable one. The potential for change resonates with the utopia framed by Ruth Levitas, who centralises the idea of "not yet", implying that utopia expresses possibility.[1] The agency of the village also finds expression in *Phāṁs* through the self-organised meeting. In other words, instead of portraying the village as a place to be discarded or abandoned, contemporary Hindi writers make effort to defend the prolonged existence of the village.

[1] See Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconsistution of Society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013), 6.

Chapter 1
Telling "Herstory" of an Ex-criminal Tribe: Maitreyi Pushpa's *Almā Kabūtarī*

As one of the few contemporary Hindi women writers who has committed herself to writing about the rural world, Maitreyi Pushpa (b. 1944) is a renowned novelist in the Hindi literary field. Set in the Bundelkhand region of central India, *Almā Kabūtarī* (2000), an expansive family saga by the writer is the first Hindi novel dedicated to the Kabutara community, a former so-called criminal tribe that is still struggling with exploitation and humiliation because of the tag. Exploring the dynamics between the Kabutaras and the Kajjas, an overarching term for middle to upper castes that stands for the exploitative "others" for the Kabutaras, my analysis suggests that the narrator seeks to establish a positive identity for the community by providing an alternative history; it also shifts focalisation between the Kajjas and the Kabutaras so as to challenge the criminal tribe rhetoric and compare the Kajjas unfavourably to the Kabutaras. Since *Almā Kabūtarī* is a choral novel that features a number of main characters with different subplots, I will focus on the Kabutara characters, arguing that portrayals of characters' inner lives perform a key role in revealing the motives behind the choices that the characters make. In addition, female and male characters are clearly differentiated in terms of their fate: whereas female characters manage to survive and thrive despite their challenging circumstances, by comparison male characters are confused and end up crushed. I argue that this divergence can be linked to the writer's feminist politics and her inclination to valorise and glorify the struggle of women characters. By setting the novel in a rural world with many realistic traits, such as real toponyms, accounts of

police violence and exploitation and of the politicians-police combine, Maitreyi Pushpa seeks to recount a non-transferable tale of the Kabutaras, who live in this particular region and endure the brutalities. In this novel, the fact that the development of character arcs is closely related to their spatial movement evokes the "road chronotope" in Bildungsroman.[1] And the male and female characters develop divergent arcs during their journeys. Interestingly, despite the novel's denunciation of the exploitative forces that keep particularly but not only the Kabutara characters in a state of abjection, instead of suggesting that this dystopian rural domain is best abandoned, the narrative also suggests that commercialisation can help the Kabutara community prosper and turn the village into a liveable space.

But first, Maitreyi Pushpa's established status as a major Hindi novelist who has specialised in village novels with strong female characters deserves attention.

Maitreyi Pushpa and *Almā Kabūtarī*

> It was the first time in Hindi literature that a woman had written stories about pure village-countryside. Maitreyi had experiences that middle-class women could not even think of. Maitreyi is the first woman writer who has been constantly writing about oppressed women with depth, sympathy and understanding. Her writing focuses exclusively on rural life and struggle.[2]

This quote from renowned Hindi writer-critic Rajendra Yadav points out the significance of Maitreyi Pushpa within the contemporary Hindi literary sphere. The emergence of her writing in the 1990s drew Hindi readers' attention back to the village and distinguished her from other contemporary Hindi women writers who wrote about the urban sphere, such as Mannu Bhandari, Usha Priyamvada, or who

[1] See Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel', 243–45; Bakhtin, 'The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel)'.
[2] Rajendra Yadav, 'Eka Strī Ke Saśaktikaraṇ Kī Kahānī Hai - Maitreyī Puṣpā', in *Maitreyī Pushpā: Tathya Aura Satya*, ed. Daya Dikshit (New Delhi: Samayik Books, 2010), 268–73. Whereas I have used Raji Narasimham's English translation for quotes from the novel, translations of Hindi commentaries on Maitreyi Pushpa and her works are all mine unless specified.

wrote about the rural world of the past, like Krishna Sobti in *Zindagīnāmā*.[1] Pushpa has been productive and successful over the last twenty-five years, with more than 10 novels and several short story collections to her credit, as well as many literary awards. She remains a relevant voice in today's Hindi literary sphere. She has been a regular contributor to the magazine *Hans* and maintained a good relationship with its former editor, the late Rajendra Yadav.[2] In 2015, Maitreyi Pushpa became the first female executive director of the Hindi Academy in Delhi.

Most of her novels have the rural world—to be exact, the villages of Braj and Bundelkhand—as the main setting.[3] Those who write about the village tend to have the first-hand experience of rural life, and Pushpa is no exception. She was born in Sikurra, a small village close to Aligarh, and spent most of her childhood and adolescence in Khilli village near Jhansi. It is arguably this strong connection with the rural world in her early life that familiarised the writer with village life and has enabled her to delineate skilfully the local village society and the dynamics of its various communities.[4] Pushpa perceives the rural world through the lens of strong female subjects, showing their assertiveness in negotiating the patriarchal domination and the determination to survive adverse, often violent, circumstances.

The SAARC award-winning novel *Almā Kabūtarī*, published by Rajkamal Prakashan in 2000, is the writer's fifth novel. Although previous novels such as *Idannamam* (*This is not for me*, 1994) and *Cāk* (*The Potter's Wheel,* 1997), had

[1] See Krishna Sobti, *Zindagīnāmā: Zindā Rukh* (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 1979).
[2] See Amreek Singh Deep and Maitreyi Pushpa, 'Khud Ko Patnī Mānā Hī Nahiṁ Kabhī', *Nirantar* (blog), 4 November 2006, http://www.nirantar.org/1006-samvaad-maitrayee.
[3] The Braj area is never defined in political terms but through cultural similarity, commonly accepted to stretch from Mathura, Jalesar, Agra, Hathras and Aligarh right up to Etah, Mainpuri and Farrukhabad districts. Bhundelkhand is a politically defined district in history, consisting areas of both today Uttar Pradash and Madhya Pradesh. Her 2002 novel *Vizan*, set in a middle-class family of doctors in a metropolis, "broke the myth that Maitreyi Pushpa can only write about village." See Yadav, 'Eka Strī Ke Saśaktikaraṇ Kī Kahānī Hai - Maitreyī Puṣpā', 273; Maitreyi Pushpa, *Vizan* (New Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 2002).
[4] Her 1997 novel *Cāk*, for instance, is set in Braj, whereas *Almā kabūtarī* is set in the Bhundelkhand, as already mentioned. Maitreyi Pushpa, *Cāk* (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 1997).

already received much critical attention from both Hindi and English critics, *Almā Kabūtarī*, however, marks new possibilities in Pushpa's novel writing.[1] Its significance lies first in its subject matter. *Almā Kabūtarī* is arguably the first Hindi novel dedicated to the Kabutaras, an ex-criminal tribe.[2] It is intriguing to see how the novel constructs an identity for this stigmatised community that parallels Dalit counter-histories. At the same time, it resists merging with the overarching Dalit discourse despite the fact that the Kabutara community suffers from exploitation and oppression in similar ways because of their identity.

In her examination of Pushpa's writing, Priti Yadav posits that from *Almā Kabūtarī* onwards the writer entered a second phase in her literary production characterised by a focus on "psychological and dilemmatic facts and elements in the process of characterisation."[3] My analysis will focus on the politics of characterisation in the novel, where the writer constructs multi-dimensional characters through extensive interior psychological portrayal, revealing their inner motives behind their choices and actions.

Almā Kabūtarī is a sprawling saga spanning three generations of the Kabutaras, a community—classified as a criminal tribe under the colonial rule—that is still enduring marginalisation and exploitation. The excerpt of the 1936 speech by Nehru quoted as the epigraph of the novel expressed his concern over the Criminal

[1] See Maitreyi Pushpa, *Idannamam* (New Delhi: Kitabghar Prakashan, 1994); Pushpa, *Cāk*. For criticism of Pushpa's works, See Vijay Bahadur Singh, *Sāmājik vimarś ke āīne meṃ 'Cāk'*, 2014; Dikshit, *Maitreyī Pushpā*; Anita Vashishta, 'In between: Locating Tradition and Modernity in the Works of Maitreyi Pushpa', in *Feminism, Tradition, and Modernity*, ed. Chandrakal Padiya (Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2002); Anita Vashishta, 'Redefining Feminine Space and Aesthetics: A Study of Maitreyi Pushpa's Edennmam and Chaak', in *Indian Feminisms*, ed. Jasbir Jain and Avadhesh K. Singh (Creative Books, 2001); See Singh, *Maitreyī Pushpā*.

[2] In the Bengali world, the famous writer Mahasweta Devi was actively associated with issues concerned with local criminal tribes and published fiction on the theme, see Dilip D'Souza, 'De-Notified Tribes: Still "Criminal"?', *Economic and Political Weekly* 34, no. 51 (1999): 3576–78; Mahasweta Devi, *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2003).

[3] Priti Yadav, 'Maitreyī Pushpā ke upanyās sāhitya meṁ nārī saṁvedna' (PhD, Bundelkhand University, 2005), 33.

Tribe Act that "no tribe can be classified criminal as such, and the whole Act is out of consonance with all civilised principles of criminal justice and treatment of offenders".[1] Eighty years later, however, the novel shows that change has been slow in coming and the tribes continue to be exploited by the Kajjas and state forces such as the police. In the novel, a few individuals from the community stand up and seek to break away from the exploitation. Bhuri, for instance, a woman belonging to the first generation of characters in the novel who is already dead when the narrative opens, continues to inspire the following generations to carry on the incomplete struggle against oppression.

The story is set in a village named Madora Khurd in Bundelkhand and begins with Kadambai, a second-generation woman of the community as well as a passionate beauty, who lives with other Kabutaras on the rim of the village. Their settlement (*derā* or *bastī*) belongs to Mansaram, a Kajja who, though annoyed by the fact that the Kabutaras live on his land, still maintains good relations with them, as they are a potential vote bank for him in the village elections. The relationship between the Kajjas and the Kabutaras is immediately centre-staged through a sexual encounter between Mansaram and Kadambai and the subsequent birth of their son Rana. Mansaram is now caught in a dilemma: on the one hand, he is despised by his family, while on the other hand he does not want to leave Kadambai.

At the same time, Rana, a half-Kabutara and half-Kajja, also faces his own dilemma. Showing no interest in theft or robbery, the conventional livelihood of the Kabutara community, Rana expresses instead a strong desire to study. The fact that Rana is inclined towards a Kajja life unnerves Kadambai, but she finally agrees to send her son to school. The humiliation Rana experiences at the local village school

[1] Cited from epigraph of the novel, see Maitreyi Pushpa, *Almā kabūtarī* (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 2000).

because of his identity makes Kadambai send him away to the nearby village of Goramachchia, where he lives with Bhuri's son Ram Singh and his daughter Alma.

Ram Singh is educated and leads the life as a Kajja. In Alma's company, Rana finally feels a sense of belonging and romance blossoms between them. Rana also learns from Ram Singh about the "real" history of their community—far from being a criminal tribe, they are the descendants of the glorious Rani Padmini. When everything seems set on a good course, Rana witnesses Ram Singh's betrayal of his own community and leaves Goramachchia in great grief. It turns out that Ram Singh was coerced to cooperate with the police and give them Kabutaras who they can kill and pass off as dacoit "encounters" for the sake of their government targets. He eventually gets tortured and killed by the police himself afterwards.

Meanwhile in Madora Khurd, Mansaram has decided to move in with Kadambai in the Kabutara settlement. Inspired by a childhood friend, who claims that "agriculture is not the only profession" (*khetībārī hī akelā dhandhā nahīṁ*, 145), Mansaram mortgages the land and manages to obtain a liquor licence for the Kabutaras. They set up a *ṭhekā* (a liquor shop), which for the first time brings prosperity to the community.

Although the novel is entitled *Almā Kabūtarī*, Alma, a beautiful, educated and independent girl, makes her entrance in the narrative quite late. After her father Ram Singh's death, Alma is first left in the care of a friend of her father, who promptly sells her to a local dacoit, Surajbhan. Surajbhan puts her under house arrest and coincidentally Dheeraj, Mansaram's nephew, is one of the wardens. In the course of his interaction with Alma, Dheeraj develops both affection and sympathy towards Alma and lets her flee. This brings him dehumanising revenge from Surajbhan, and Dheeraj has no choice but to take shelter in the Kabutara *derā* just like Mansaram. After the escape, Alma becomes the mistress and aide of

Surajbhan's political opponent Shriram Shastri, a local dacoit-turned-politician. While the schooled Alma helps Shastri with miscellaneous political tasks, she gradually learns politics herself. After Shastri's political murder, Alma takes the opportunity to replace him as a leader. The denouement suggests that Alma will take advantage of her political clout—which has come to her through sexual exploitation but also her own skills—to make a difference for her community.

In the next section, I turn to explore the representation of the Kabutara community, as they are the main subject matter of the novel. Partly because of the concentration upon this particular community, this novel stands out from the writer's other village-oriented novels. It is interesting to see how the narrative negotiates the entrenched criminal stigma of the community and draws upon the discourse of criminal tribe to reframe the identity of the Kabutaras.

Representing the Kabutaras and Constructing an Identity for Them

Detailing the dynamics between the Kabutara community and the Kajja society, the novel, I suggest, does not simply depict the submissive position of the Kabutaras subject to constant exploitation and humiliation. The narrative instead attempts to demonstrate that far from passively carrying the stigma of the criminal tribe, the Kabutaras actively celebrate the quality of bravery and establish their own identity through, among other ways, telling an alternative, their "real", history. In this way, going beyond merely displaying the pain of the community and generating empathy in the reader, the novel seeks to construct an alternative image for this community, contradicting the mainstream narrative that labels the community a criminal tribe. As the narrative moves forward, the reader comes to appreciate the agency and assertiveness of the Kabutaras. In addition to uncovering this largely unknown community—their lives and sorrow—for the mainstream Hindi readership,

the representation of the Kabutaras, I argue, overturns the image of the criminal tribe by constructing a positive identity and demonstrating their human agency.

Although the term "criminal tribes" (also known as denotified tribes or *vimukt jāti* in Hindi) is a colonial legacy, it is still relevant to some communities in today's India. The enactment of the Criminal Tribes Act in 1871 marked the beginning of the classification of criminal tribes in India.[1] The word "criminal" here highlights the profession of the communities who hereditarily make a living on robbery and thuggery.[2] The idea of classifying certain groups under the title "criminal tribe" shares similarities with the codification of the caste system in the colonial census and the schedules. Under the Criminal Tribe Act, the communities who came under it were forced to abandon their nomadic lifestyle and change their profession to lawful ones, usually farming, in the name of reforming and civilising.[3] However, far from obtaining freedom by complying with the Act, people belonging to these criminal tribes were kept under strict surveillance, and a police officer or village headman could arrest those who disobeyed the surveillance rule.[4] Therefore, instead of normalising their status, the way these tribes were treated actually manoeuvred them into a disadvantaged situation, where they not only continued to experience discrimination because of the criminal label but also were likely to come into conflict with other groups and communities as well as with the police.

The Kabutaras are not a fictional construction by Maitreyi Pushpa; the writer grew up witnessing their life in a nearby village.[5] As per colonial ethnography, the

[1] This act was initially only applicable in North India and after several amendments it was finally applied to the whole India in 1911. See Meena Radhakrishna, *Dishonoured by History: 'Criminal Tribes' and British Colonial Policy* (Orient Blackswan, 2001), 5–6.
[2] See K. M. Kapadia, 'The Criminal Tribes of India', *Sociological Bulletin*, 1952, 99–125.
[3] See Radhakrishna, *Dishonoured by History*, 7.
[4] See Sanjay Nigam, 'A Social History of a Colonial Stereotype: The Criminal Tribes and Castes of Uttar Pradesh, 1871-1930' (PhD, SOAS, University of London, 1987), 7–8.
[5] See Lok Sabha TV, Sāhitya Saṁsār: lekhikā Maitreyī Pushpā, accessed 27 July 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=opEXMjbdxKw. In another interview, the writer claimed that she spent a long time with the community while and did comprehensive research while writing the novel, see Ramshankar Dvivedi, Satyavan, and Maitreyi Pushpa, 'Sāre Pahare Deh Par Haiṁ Phir Is Deh Kī

Kabutara community was part of the Nats, a community of gipsy dancers, acrobats and prostitutes with a complex composition, and it is extremely difficult to trace their origins.[1] According to William Crooke, Kabutara women (*Kabūtarī*) took their name from the pigeon (*kabūtar* in Hindi).[2] Liquor plays a crucial role in the life of the Nats community, the "summum bonum" of the community, as Patrick Carnegy put it, and "every offence is referred to arbitration and expiated by plentiful libations of strong drink."[3] In *Almā Kabūtarī*, making non-licensed liquor forms part of the livelihood of the Kabutara community. Their *derā* is constantly patronised by the Kajjas for illegal alcohol, and precisely due to this illicit business they are often exposed to attacks from the police and licensed liquor producers. Unlike the term Kabutaras, which refers to a single community, Kajjas is an overarching title for the so-called civilised society, which, as I show, seeks to perpetuate the marginalised position of the Kabutaras.[4] The term therefore describes all non-Kabutaras in the narrative, including people living in the village, the police, licensed liquor brewers and politicians.

When representing the Kabutaras, the novel conforms to a narrative pattern characterised by a shifting point of view which moves back and forth between the Kabutaras and the Kajjas. In other words, the focalisation is divided into an internal

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Bāt Kyoṃ Na Kareṁ! Rāmaśaṃkar Dvivedī Aur Satyavān Se Bātcīt', in *Maitreyī Pushpā: Strī Hone Kī Kathā*, ed. Vijay Bahadur Singh (New Delhi: Kitabghar Prakashan, 2011), 45–46.

[1] See W. Crooke, *Tribes And Castes Of The North Western Provinces And Oudh*, vol. 4, 1896, 56–76. Risley also points out that in the context of Bengal the Kabutaras are included under the name of Bediya, "Bazigar, Kabutari, Bhanumati, Dorabaz, acrobats and conjurors, probably closely akin to the Nats and Kanjars of Hindustan." See Herbert Hope Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal: Ethnographic Glossary*, vol. 1, 1892, 83. For a comprehensive mapping of dancing communities in north India, see Anna Morcom, *Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance: Cultures of Exclusion* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

[2] Crooke, *Tribes And Castes Of The North Western Provinces And Oudh*, 4:59.

[3] Patrick Carnegy, *Notes on the Races, Tribes and Castes Inhabiting the Province of Avadh* (Lucknow: Oudh government Press, 1868), 15.

[4] Since there is no clarification in the novel on what "Kajja" stands for, it becomes one of the frequently raised questions during conversations with the writer, who denies that "Kajja" refers to any specific upper caste. See Ramsharan Dvivedi, Maitreyi Pushpa, and Satyavan, "Sāre Pahare Deha Para Haiṁ Phira Isa Deha Kī Bāta Kyoṁ Na Kareṁ! Rāmaśaṁkara Dvivedī Aura Satyavāna Se Bātacīta," in *Maitreyī Pushpā: Strī Hone Kī Kathā*, ed. Vijay Bahadur Singh (New Delhi: Kitabghar Prakashan, 2011), 44–45.

one, which is aligned with the Kabutara community, and an external one, which stays with the Kajjas. But unlike the oscillating perspective in *Tarpaṇ*, as we shall see in the next chapter, where the Dalits and the upper-caste alliance are allocated relatively equal narrative space, here the shifting perspective is meant to *expose* the violence in the way the Kajjas relate to the Kabutaras and *reveal* the Kabutaras' feelings and motivations. From the external, Kajja perspective, the Kabutaras are consistently perceived as carrying the criminal label and therefore a threat to the Kajjas who, in order to maintain their domination, treat the community with manipulation, intimidation and violence. This is evident in the liberal use of epithets and abusive words in their language. The reader is thus invited to question the so-called civilised status and self-perception of the Kajjas. Serving the purpose of discovery, the internal perspective of the Kabutaras, in contrast, provides more insights on the dynamics within the community and how they negotiate with external circumstances. Far from just engaging in habitual robberies for a living, as outsiders perceive them, they are a vibrant and complex social entity with their own values, beliefs and even internal disputes. All the representations through an internal lens contribute to creating a powerful and vivid image of the Kabutaras, in direct contradiction to the entrenched criminal tribe rhetoric.

Though Nehru's quote about the Criminal Tribe Act in the epigraph suggests the theme, the narrative actually begins by focalising on the Kajja character Mansaram, and it is through his perspective that the Kabutaras are introduced for the first time. The opening sentence, "Mansaram is ruined—ruined by Kadambai", highlights the dire consequence for Mansaram of his sexual attraction for and

encounter with Kadambai.[1] It is followed by the real reason behind Mansaram's destruction:

> *Kulśīl saṁskārī maṁsārām kī jiṁdagī kabūtarī ke havāle ho gaī ki ve ghar-parivār, pūrā mauhallā, gāṁv aur nāte-riśtedāriyoṁ meṁ dhikkār ke pātr ho gae.* (1)
>
> Mansaram's life, blessed with good lineage and samskaras, has now gone into the keeping of this woman of the Kabutara tribe, of people on the fringes of society, a tribe of criminals. He has earned the horror and abhorrence of the whole neighbourhood, village, all kith and kin, home and family.[2]

Whilst in the original Hindi text the narrator does not immediately reveal to the reader that Kadambai is from the criminal tribe, the description of Mansaram as *kulśīl saṁskārī* (of good lineage and refinement) implies a sharp disparity in their background. The reader immediately perceives the hypergamic nature of the encounter and the subordination of the Kabutaras.

The narrative scope then expands to touch briefly upon the dynamics between Mansaram and the Kabutaras. When he was a child, Mansaram was told scary stories of how the Kabutaras used black magic to enslave the Kajjas. Such demonisation is linked to history and xenophobia—it is said that the Kabutaras sought refuge on the land belonging to Mansaram's family after the 1857 rebellion. As the Kabutaras gradually enlarged their *bastī* and population, and provided the Kajjas with illicit liquor and sex, they became a thorn in Mansaram's side. However, the only reason preventing him from driving them out is that they can potentially be

[1] The original Hindi text of this sentence is *Maṁsārām ko tabāh kiyā hai kadambāī ne*, which has Kadambai as the active subject and Mansaram as the passive object, who is privileged by appearing intentionally ahead of the subject. The English translation by Raji Narasimhan uses a passive form, perhaps to retain the emphasis.

[2] It should be noted that the original text does not give any further explanation of the word *kabūtarī* which, referring to Kadambai, literally means the woman of a Kabutara community. "[O]f people on the fringes of society, a tribe of criminals" cannot be found in any edition of the Hindi original text. Moreover, it is natural for Hindi readers to understand *kabūtarī* as the feminine form of *kabūtarā*. Moreover, unless specified, English translations of the original Hindi texts in this chapter are all by Raji Narasimhan. See Maitreyi Pushpa, *Alma Kabutari*, trans. Raji Narasimhan (New Delhi: Katha, 2006).

used as a vote bank in his election to village headman. Here, the *kulśīl saṁskārī* of Mansaram only brings a touch of irony, when he plots this manipulation:

> *Bahiṣkrt haiṁ to kyā, voṭar to haiṁ hī. ve cāheṁ to unke dam par pradhān ban sakate haiṁ. Maṁsārām ko yakāyak mahsūsa huā— unke khet meṁ kabūtarā nahīṁ, voṭoṁ kī fasal lahlahā rahī hai.* (15)
>
> So what if they were outcastes? They were voters! If he tried, he could become pradhan with their support. He suddenly felt that in his fields it was not the sinewy bodies of the kabutaras winding in and out, but a harvest of votes rippling in the breeze.

In addition to revealing Mansaram's calculation, the quote also points out how the Kajjas perceive the Kabutaras. Although the word *bahiṣkrt* literally means "excluded", in this context, it also alludes to their caste status, and the novel's translator Raji Narasimhan translates this word as "outcaste" (19).

The narrative then turns to a sudden raid on the Kabutara *bastī* by the police and licensed liquor producers. I read this as a critique of the police, which, instead of a regulating force, align themselves with other liquor brewers to launch the attack and perform the role of perpetrators. It is also noticeable that here the narrator intentionally makes the Kabutara women take the brunt of the raid:

> *"Vah gaī! Pakaṛo sālī ko."*
>
> *"peṭvālī hai. Maṭake jaisā peṭ. Lāo idhar. Ham baccā paidā karte haiṁ." Ādamī painṭ kholne lagā.* (44)
>
> "There she goes. Catch her, sali!"
>
> "A pregnant one, belly like a pot. Bring her here. We'll get the child out." The man began taking off his pants.

The narrator highlights the brutality of the attack, in which the Kabutara women are targeted and subject to severe physical abuse. The victim is called *sālī* (sister-in-law, a term of abuse) by the unnamed attacker in the quote—even *raṇḍī* (whore) in another dialogue—a manifestation of absolute power over the Kabutaras. The stress

on the violence against the Kabutara woman, I suggest, reinforces the gender aspect of this domination. For the Kajjas, the Kabutara community is liable to manipulation, and the Kabutara women, in particular, are easy targets of sexual exploitation. Posing a challenge to the criminal tribe rhetoric, the depiction of the attack posits that the Kajja attackers are the actual criminals.

The marginalisation of the Kabutaras has become a normal practice in the village's everyday life, too. Rana, the son of Kadambai and Mansaram, is an aberrant figure in the community. Unlike his fellow Kabutaras skilled in robbery, he shows great enthusiasm for learning. The narrative highlights the ways Rana is mistreated in the village school because of his identity. In a scene where Rana climbs up the peepal tree to reach his bag, a prank played on him by other Kajja kids, he gets told off by the schoolmaster:

> *Sāle, yah nahīṁ dekhtā kī pīpal par devatāoṁ kā vās hotā hai. Skūl jaisī pavitr jagah meṁ baiṭh jāne diyā to tū hamāre devatāoṁ ke mūṁṛa par nācegā?* (81)
>
> Wretch! Don't you know that the peepal is the abode of the gods? Will you dance on the heads of our gods because you're allowed a foothold in the sacred space of school?

In another incident Rana is refused access to the school water tap. Similarly, Rana is warned off by the schoolmaster in clear terms:

> *Tū nal nahīṁ chuegā. Nal ke āsapās bhī dekh liyā to ... Yād rakhnā, yahāṁ sipāhī āte haiṁ, pakaṛavā dūṁgā.* (82)
>
> You will not touch the pump. Even if you're seen anywhere nearabout, I'll have you caught. The sipahi comes here, I'm warning you.

In both quotes the schoolmaster uses *sāle* (a term of abuse) and *tū* (an offensive form of "you" in this context) to address Rana, showing great distain for the Kabutara child. As both the peepal tree and water symbolise cleanness and

purity, the two incidents that happen to Rana evoke depictions of *chuāchūt* (restrictions on touching), a recurrent motif in Hindi Dalit writing.[1] It is thus proper to contend that in the eyes of the Kajjas, the criminal tribe label makes the Kabutaras *de facto* Dalits. Despite this, however, the narrator refrains from using the word "Dalit" or any other low-caste signifiers throughout the narrative. I read this as a conscious decision which endeavours not to subsume the portrayal of the Kabutaras into the overarching Dalit discourse. The writer purposefully maintains a sense of ambiguity by eliminating references to certain caste from the narrative—let us not forget that "Kajja" also functions as a generic term form which the reader is not able to identify their castes. In this way, the novel seeks to create an exclusive discursive space of the tribe, and at the same time avoid subsuming the Kabutaras into the overarching Dalit community.

Whilst Rana exemplifies the setbacks a Kabutara can suffer in the attempt to break out of their conventional lifestyle, the character of Ram Singh embodies the prolonged ordeal even if he has completed the transformation. For the Kajjas, a Kabutara remains inferior and the criminal stigma is forever attached to him or her, even though he or she is no longer associated with their traditional livelihood. Thanks to his mother Bhuri, who left their village Madora Khurd and prostituted herself to educate her son, Ram Singh has since adopted the Kajja lifestyle and become a village schoolmaster in Goramachchiya. Yet instead of bringing any tangible change to his social status, what he has achieved makes him more vulnerable to the Kajjas' domination and exploitation. It seems that Bhuri's struggle has an opposite effect because after becoming educated, Ram Singh poses an even bigger threat to the Kajjas. The police constantly harass him and ask for a monthly

[1] As I will show in the next chapter, Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography *Jūṭhan*, for instance, recounts a very similar incident in which young Valmiki is refused to access the water tap in the school campus. See Omprakash Valmiki, *Joothan: An Untouchable's Life*, trans. Arun Prabha Mukherjee (Columbia University Press, 2008), 19.

cut from his salary. In a scene where Ram Singh is stopped by a police officer, the language laden with abuse used to humiliate him reflects the way in which the Kajja people perceive him:

> *Tūne soc liyā ki terā dhandhā badal gayā to ham bhī badal gae? Hamārā mahaṁgāī bhattā baṛhnā bākī hai abhī. samajhe? ... mādarco...harāmī, beṭī ke labṛe! Hameṁ aṁgūṭhā dikhākar jā rahā thā? Abe ammā ke ḍhallā, bhūl gayā matarī ke saṅg-saṅg kaise ātā thā? ... Tere dukh-taklīpha kaṭ gae to kyā hameṁ marā mān liyā? Terī matārī ke purāne khasam haiṁ. Bāpoṁ ko cāl badalkar dikhā rahā hai?* (100)
>
> You thought that since your profession had changed we have changed too? You owe us dearness allowance, all right? Don't forget! ... Motherfucker! Swine! Your daughter...! Cocking a snook at us? You Amma's onion, have you forgotten how you used to come up here clutching your Amma's palla? ... Because you hit better days you take us for dead? We're all ex-husbands of your Amma, all right? Are you strutting round in front of your fathers?

The quote indicates that it is still impossible for Ram Singh to avoid the insults, even if he has managed to make good through education. For the Kajjas, on top of an easy target for exploitation, the Kabutaras are regarded as a threat to the established domination particularly when they attempt to change their social status. Therefore, the higher the status the Kabutaras reach in the social ladder, the more discrimination and exploitation they tend to be exposed to. It is because of a deep fear that one day the Kabutaras will eventually get rid of the Kajjas' control through ways such as the reservation system, as a police officer spells out in the following quote:

> *Ye sāle to apnā rojgār badal rahe haiṁ. Ek din aisā āegā ki pulis mahīnā haphtā to taras jāegī. Ārakṣaṇ ke jarie baṛhe ā rahe haiṁ abhī to, phir khud-ba-khud jāgarūk ho jāeṁge.* (105)
>
> These bastards are now changing their profession. A day will come when the police will be left thirsting for not just the weekly commission, but their very salary as well. These bastards are getting reservations right and left, and soon they'll get wise and in the know of things.

These quotes, describing the image of the Kabutaras as seen from the external perspective of the Kajjas, evoke the "bad Brahmins" we have seen in Dalit writing.[1] In this way, the narrator not only fully demonstrates the inferior status of the Kabutaras, but also raises questions about the so-called superiority of the Kajjas. The external perspective, I argue, is consistent with the criminal tribe rhetoric, which, through simply labelling the Kabutaras as offenders, actually seeks to perpetuate the monstrous injustice against the community.

To counter this discourse, the narrator provides an internal perspective illustrating the vigourous dynamism within the community. This internal perspective, characterised by the way the Kabutaras perceive themselves, constructs a rounded image of the community by demystifying their own worldviews and poses a forceful challenge to generalisation stemming from the external perspective. The comparison between the external and internal perspectives contributes to articulating an alternative Kabutara identity.

The Kabutaras' traditional profession of robbery, for instance, seen as a threat by the Kajjas, is celebrated by them as an embodiment of heroism. While the story of Jangalia, Kadambai's husband and the most skillful thief of the community, is told as part of Mansaram's memory, the narrative registers a shift of perspective from the Kajja character to the Kabutaras as well as an explicit change of the narrative tone:

> *Bārah varṣ kī avasthā tak tīn ghaṛiyāṁ aur ek hajār rupyā lūṭ cukā thā. Cār bār jel gayā. Thā to bālak, par sipāhiyoṁ ko khūb pidātā thā. Havā par savār jaṅgaliyā ko pulis ne corī ke jurm meṁ kam, apane chakāne ke lie jyādā se jyādā sajāeṁ dīṁ aur havālāt meṁ ḍāle rakhā … Pandrah varṣ kā nāmī cor jaṅgaliyā! birādarī meṁ parākram phail gayā.* (19)

[1] See Brueck, 'Good Dalits and Bad Brahmins: Melodramatic Realism in Dalit Short Stories'.

> By the age of twelve he had stolen three watches, one thousand rupees and had been to jail four times. Child he was, but could fool the police like a veteran. Riding the wind, Jangalia got harsher punishments and longer jail terms from the police, who chafed more at the tricks he played on them than at the thefts he committed … The fifteen-year-old ace thief Jangalia! His prowess spread and stood tall among his people.

In this quote, when describing Jangalia's gift for theft and the trouble he makes for the police with his skills, the narrator actually praises his talent and valour instead of reproaching him for the crimes. Although Jangalia is a minor character who dies in the first chapter because of Mansaram's evil plot, he is celebrated as a model for his fearless, courageous and rebellious spirit. At his funeral the headman of the tribe Sarman eulogises his heroism, declaring "If bravehearts like Jangalia die, the Kajjas would have crushed us alive and drunk us down by now" (*Jaṁgaliyā jaise vīroṁ kā maraṇ ho jātā to kajjā log ab tak hameṁ ghoṭ-pīskar pī jāte*, 38).

While the Kajjas may take their dominance over the Kabutara community for granted, the Kabutaras turn out to be conscious of their subordination and prepare themselves for resistance. It is evident in how Kadambai teaches her son Rana:

> *Aur hamārī jiṅdagī kharapatavār, kajjā log ukhāṛne par āmādā rahte haiṁ. Dekhtā nahīṁ, pulis pīṭne ā jātī hai. Ṭhekevāle bebāt hī hameṁ khadeṛte haiṁ. Par beṭā ham bhī kam nahīṁ, bhūkhe-pyāse bhī topakhāne lūṭane se bāja nahīṁ āte.* (38)
>
> And ours are lives that are ever teetering. The kajjas are keen on uprooting us. Don't you see the police coming over every now and then to beat us up? The licence holders drive us out for no particular reason. But son, we're not taking it all lying down. We are ready to rob their armouries and fortresses, so what if we are starving.

It is clear in the quote that instead of enduring passively, the Kabutaras are fully aware of the exploitation exerted by the Kajjas against them. Kadambai strives to shape Rana into a qualified Kabutara man equipped with their own moral standards, a form of socialisation that aims not only to prevent her son from inclining towards

the Kajjas, but also to emphasise that he has to shoulder the responsibility and be ready to resist the oppression. Kadambai's claim— "*ham bhī kam nahiṁ*" — immediately conveys pride and self-assertiveness.

Moreover, the internal perspective does not refrain from providing a more rounded image, which demonstrates the internal dynamism at work and contestations within the Kabutara community. It evokes the representation of the Dalits in *Tarpaṇ*, in which the narrator shows the conflict of interest within them. But a clash of values exists even among the Kabutaras. For instance, while the headman Sarman, a representative of the community, holds on to the traditional values, by contrast the educated Kabutara Ram Singh refuses to conform to them. When Ram Singh comes to the *bastī* to take Rana away and have the boy educated, Sarman, who insists that Ram Singh's real purpose is to find his daughter Alma a husband, accuses him of not following the traditional customs:

> *Gharajaṁvāī banāne kā calan hamāre yahāṁ nahīṁ hai. Phir abhī tumhārī laṛkī se isake bhāṁvareṁ paṛ gaī haiṁ kyā? Dāmād kaise ho gayā? Tum janeū pahankar hamārī rasmeṁ meṁṭne āe ho?* (108)
>
> We don't have the practice of live-in sons-in-law, like house-broken dogs. And has he gone through the betrothal ceremony with your daughter? How does he become your son-in-law? Have you come to throw our customs to the winds, empowered by your scared thread?

Apart from questioning Ram Singh's intention, Sarman also expresses concern over his identity, which perhaps is the crux of the dispute. *Janeū*, the scared thread and symbol of the upper community groups, is used here as a metaphor, if not with a sense of irony, for Ram Singh's high status in the eyes of his own people. Explaining convincingly the significance of educating young Rana and clarifying his position, Ram Singh refutes the suspicions about his intention and identity:

> *Irādā yah hai ki laṛke meṁ paṛhane kī lagan hai to paṛh jāe. āge calkar kajjā logoṁ kī bātoṁ ko samajh le, apanī samajhā sake. ham logoṁ ke ūpara jitne kes calte haiṁ, ham unmeṁ se kitnoṁ kī pairavī kar pāte haiṁ? Avval to bhāg hī lete haiṁ, agar kuch kes calne bhī lageṁ to yah nahīṁ jānte ki kānūn pālan kiyā jā rahā hai yā nahīṁ? Jo sac-jhūṭh phaislā de diyā, vahī māthe par cipakā liyā.* (108)
>
> I want the boy to study if he's inclined towards it. So that later on he can talk on equal terms with the kajjas, understand what they say, and put across what he feels. Of all the cases that are brought against us how many are we able to follow? In the first place we simply run away. Even if we do manage to get some cases going we've no idea if the law is being followed or not. Whatever the verdict, truth, falsehood or half-truth, we accept without question.

The contradiction between Sarman and Ram Singh embodies their different attitudes within the community. While Sarman's accusation indicates his belief that the Kabutara identity can only be maintained by conforming to their conventional values and practices, Ram Singh, by contrast, stresses the practicality of education, through which the Kabutaras will be able to reach a position on a par with the Kajjas. Sarman actually shares the same stance with Kadambai, who, as we saw in a previous quote, believes that the community should stick to their tradition as a tool in standing against the Kajjas' brutality. As an educated Kabutara, Ram Singh however firmly believes that it is precisely lack of knowledge that results in the subordination of the Kabutaras, despite the fact that education seems to have failed to bring him the expected effect. He reiterates the significance of education later in a determined tone, while disapproving of the value of their traditional path:

> *Sabse baṛī bāt sāiṁs kā ādhār hai. Ab ham aisī galtiyāṁ nahīṁ kareṁge ki pīche rah jāeṁ. Hamāre purkhe inhīṁ galtiyoṁ se itne pichaṛe kī havā-pānī aur dharatī se bedakhal kar die gae. Jamānā badal rahā hai, ham bhī badleṁge. Bam aur pistauloṁ ke zamāne meṁ tīr-talvāroṁ se kām nahīṁ caltā, hamārī pichlī pīṛhiyoṁ ne is bāt ko nahīṁ samjhā. Kajjā logoṁ ke hunar nahīṁ sīkhe, unke tyāgne meṁ jātī kā garv samjhā. Yah dīgar bāt rahī ki usī hunar se kamāe hue kajjā logoṁ ke dhan ko curāne meṁ gurej na mānā. bahādurī se corī karte haiṁ. Chipkar bac nikalne meṁ dhana-dhany ho uṭhte haiṁ.* (126)

> We have the backing of science now. Now we will not make the mistakes that kept us stupid and backward. Our forebears got pushed behind precisely because of these stupidities and as a result lost right over even air and water and land. Times are changing and we will change too. Swords and arrows do not help in the age of bombs and pistols—our earlier generations did not understand this. They didn't learn up the skills of the kajjas, they thought their pride rested on giving them up. It's another thing that they never thought shy of stealing the wealth of the kajjas made by those very skills. We kabutaras steal with bravado. And give ourselves hearty pats on our back for slinking away free.

A more radical assertion of the Kabutara identity appears in chapter 8, in which Ram Singh recounts the story of their ancestors, which is also the story of the beginning of their stigmatisation. Since the tale is only passed down orally from previous generations, it forms an alternative history, one that is unknown to outsiders and offers a counter-narrative to the mainstream discourse that not only labels the community as criminals but also helps perpetuate their exclusion and marginalisation from the society. The way Ram Singh recounts the history of their community, I argue, evokes the ongoing project of de-marginalisation initiated by Dalit political groups through refashioning their own histories.[1] In his examination of such historical reinvention practices by different low-caste communities, Badri Narayan points out that

> these histories and new narratives are helping the Dalits to demarginalise themselves and become a part of mainstream contemporary Indian life, while strengthening their own identities, inculcating self-confidence, improving their present, and carving out a brighter future for themselves and their children.[2]

I argue that *Almā kabūtarī* employs the same technique of refashioning history, a fundamental strategy to construct a positive and glorious Kabutara identity and, at

[1] See Badri Narayan, 'Demarginalisation and History Dalit Re-Invention of the Past', *South Asia Research* 28, no. 2 (2008): 169–184; Badri Narayan, 'Inventing Caste History: Dalit Mobilisation and Nationalist Past', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 38, no. 1–2 (2004): 193–220; Badri Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India: Culture, Identity, and Politics*, Cultural Subordination and the Dalit Challenge, v. 5 (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006).
[2] Narayan, 'Demarginalisation and History Dalit Re-Invention of the Past'.

the same time, to undermine and challenge the dominant discourse associated with the criminal stigma. In addition, while Narayan argues that the "BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party) culls out women heroes and the myths surrounding them to build up the image of its leader Mayawati", the fact that the reinvention of history in the novel also centres around female figures, I suggest, seeks to stress the particular significance of women in the community and embodies its women-oriented politics, a point that I will illustrate further in the next section.[1]

The story that Ram Singh tells consists of two parts: the first half is a modified version of *Padmāvat* featuring Rani Padmini, while the second part centralises on a woman fighter named Jhalkaribai, a follower of Rani of Jhansi in the 1857 revolt.[2] In the original story of *Padmāvat* by Jayasi and many later versions in various languages, the tale ends with Rani Padmini committing *jauhar* (killing oneself sacrificially in the fire) together with her female followers.[3] While telling the story, Ram Singh implies in a distainful tone that the ending is a complete fabrication by the Kajjas in the name of praising Padmini's chastity:

> *Yah kathā sabko mālūm hai. Hamse jyādā kajjā log is itihās ko jānte haiṁ aura kahte haiṁ—rānī ke sāmne thā jauhar. Satī honā strī kā dharma hai. Rājapūtaniyāṁ parpuruṣa ke sparśa se pahle, khud ko bhasma karnā jyādā acchā samajhtī haiṁ—pativratā kā jīvan yahī hai … Itihās kī kitāboṁ meṁ likhā hai—Padminī haṁste-haṁste jal marī. Sāth meṁ cittauṛgaṛ kī striyāṁ aur bacce bhī hom ho gae.* (128)
>
> Everyone knows this story. The kajjas know it more than us. And they say—For the rani now there was only one option—jauhar. To become a sati is the duty of a wife. At the very prospect of touch of a strange man, Rajput women burn themselves to death and

[1] Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India*, 26.
[2] *Padmāvat,* originally written in Awadhi language by Jayasi, is an epic poem recounting the story of Rani Padmini, see Thomas de Bruijn, *The Ruby in the Dust: Poetry and History of the Indian Padmavat by Sufi Poet Muhammad Jayasi* (Amsterdam University Press, 2012). It should be noted that the narrative here only retells the story of Padmini but without making any reference to *Padmāvat* or Jayasi. Also, Narayan's research indicates that Jhalkaribai is among the women heroes re-invented in the Dalit campaign. For a comprehensive story of this reinvention, see Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India*, 113–32.
[3] See Ramya Sreenivasan, *The Many Lives of a Rajput Queen: Heroic Pasts in India, c. 1500-1900* (University of Washington Press, 2017), 120–23.

> thereby avert the touch. This is the dharma of a chaste woman, whose god is her husband … In history books it is written that … Padmini died in the fire, laughing. With her the women and children of Chittorgarh also turned to ashes.

The Kabutara version of the Padmini story does not end like this, however—Rani Padmini managed to escape with her followers instead of committing the notorious *jauhar*. They successfully ran away at the cost of the queen's reputation; Padmini had no choice other than to order her people to do anything necessary in order to survive. The children of Padmini's followers gradually formed into various nomadic tribes according to their professions—the Kabutaras, singers and dancers, became one of these communities. By linking their origin to Rani Padmini, the Rajput queen, this retelling of their history serves the purpose of reinventing their social background, confirming that these communities are not born with an inferior status. The criminal stigma imposed on them is stated to be thus completely groundless, and the so-called criminal offences they commit are for the single purpose of survival against the adverse circumstances, which result only from failing to conform to the ludicrous institution of *jauhar*. This modified ending of the *Padmāvat* story, diverting it from a celebration of the chastity of Rajput women, presents a radical critique to the patriarchal tradition and is consistent with the writer's feminist commitment, evident in my later analysis, that women should have the agency to control their bodies.

The second part of this alternative history recounts how the rebellious acts of these communities against the British during the 1857 revolt eventually led to their criminalisation. The British colonisers were intriguingly regarded as "white Kajjas" by the Kabutaras, indicating that they shared the exploitative nature of Indian Kajjas. Inspired by Jhalkaribai, a follower of Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi, in the Bundelkhand area, the nomadic rebels were actively involved in guerrilla attacks and became a

thorn in the side of the British. In order to crack down on them, the British came up with the strategy of declaring the rebels as belonging to criminal tribes, and at the same time mobilised both the army and the police to wipe them out. Finally, in 1871 the passing of the Criminal Tribe Act legitimised the control of the British as well as the local Kajja people over the nomadic communities. As Ram Singh reflects upon the unjust criminalisation, "the soldiers of revolution were now prisoners at the police station (*gadar ke sipāhī, sadar ke kaidī*, 132)". This section of the refashioned history, redressing the contribution of the community to the 1857 revolt, attempts to insert the Kabutaras in the national history and takes the process of identity formation a step further, just as Dalits have done with Jhalkaribai and other, often female, figures.[1] On top of the first half which highlights the glorious past of the community by linking their origin to the Rajputs, the second half aims to restore their dignity through incorporating them into the mainstream nationalist discourse and allow them to acquire a respectable position in the social structure.

Through the comparison generated by the shifting narrative focalisation and retelling of the glorious past of the Kabutaras, the novel constructs a rounded image and a reconfigured identity for the community as opposed to the mainstream discourse that merely labels them as criminals. In the next section, I turn to the writer's feminist ideology by analysing her portrayal of Kabutara characters and illustrating the politics of characterisation.

Politics of Characterisation and Portraying Kabutara Characters

While the Kabutara community stays at the centre of the narrative focus as a single entity, the narrator actually allocates more narrative space to a relatively small cast of characters. It is through the delineation of these characters that the dynamic

[1] See Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India*.

interactions between the Kajjas and the Kabutaras unfold. By analysing individual characters, this section focuses on the devices employed in characterisation and explores the way in which characterisation facilitates the articulation of the writer's feminist aesthetics and politics.

One of the significant characteristics of contemporary Hindi village writing is the reconfigured delineation of rural female subjects as self-defined agents, who, despite the patriarchal constraints, strive to maintain full control in terms of how to live their lives. It is also evident in other texts I examine in this thesis. Instead of being portrayed as docile and self-effacing "ideals", the women characters in *Phāṁs*, such as Kala, Shakun and Asha, as we shall see in chapter 3, negotiate space for themselves in a rural environment full of constraints and demonstrate a strong commitment to pursuing independence and self-realisation. In addition to portraying rural female characters in a similar way as strong and active agents, Maitreyi Pushpa adds to her characters another layer of subtlety, separating them from the rural female subjects constructed by male writers. Fully aware of the sexual difference that can lead to distinct gender biases and perspectives, the writer even goes as far as to question the ability of men to represent the female psyche.[1] I suggest that Pushpa's own position as a woman enables her to provide further insights into her women characters.

Maitreyi Pushpa employs the depiction of the characters' inner world of thoughts and emotions as a significant part in the process of characterisation, apart from their appearance, action and speech. Pushpa captures the characters' emotional aspect and highlights their inner conflicts. The reader comes to be privy to the complex inner life of the characters through these psychological expositions, a

[1] Maitreyi Pushpa, 'Nāyikā Se Muṭhbheṛ', *Kathakram*, November 1998. Cited from Vashishta, 'Redefining Feminine Space and Aesthetics: A Study of Maitreyi Pushpa's *Edennmam* and *Chaak*'.

bridge for the reader to understand the incidents happening to them with greater engagement. The characters thus do not merely work on the semiotic level as performing certain narrative functions but are multi-dimensional figures.

But unlike other male writers who tend to celebrate the rebellious spirit in their rural women characters such as Mangali in *Muṭṭhī meṁ Gāṁv* (Ch. 4), Maitreyi Pushpa's female agents are not always overt rebels. They know how to negotiate and survive the adverse external environment, and they always stay true to their feminine desires. Instead of being the constant objects of men's sexual desire, Pushpa's characters approach their sexuality subjectively, demonstrating full control of their body and mind without being subject to men. Celebrating such unashamed form of honesty and agency evident in the writer's characterisation, Rajendra Yadav states:

> In the blink of an eye Maitreyi's heroines broke the mold of the "Indian woman" who cries and moans or curses her fate. Life's struggles and incongruities have contributed to the creation of her heroines. The heroine of Idannamam, Manda, is one such woman, who makes her own decisions, and searches for her own way. In the middle of such a conservative, superstitious, and traditional society, this heroine doesn't just amaze readers and critics, but shakes them up as well. Then she gave us Gomā haṁsatī hai, where Goma balances her husband and her lover, openly maintaining this liaison. With great courage and skill Maitreyi has brought to the fore the conflict of a divided heart and the psychology of moving beyond this. The novel Cāk is the story of the courage to choose and live one's life for oneself. On the one hand, there is Reshma, who refuses to abort her illegitimate child and is murdered as a result. This is the outcome of her decision. On the other hand, there is Sarang, who makes her own decisions and not only struggles against the stench of conservatism, but who freely establishes a sexual relationship with a man other than her husband, without any sense of sin or guilt. Every village has its Kalavati as well, who encourages such relationships. It goes without saying that Maitreyi has been showered with unbridled abuse for such sex scenes. [1]

[1] See Yadav, 'Eka Strī Ke Saśaktikaraṇ Kī Kahānī Hai - Maitreyī Puṣpā', 271–72. The translation of original Hindi text is by Richard Dalecy, cited from Delacy, 'Politics, Pleasure and Cultural Production', 155.

Although women characters have to go through a fierce struggle in realising their selfhood, they stay assertive, committed and pure. And here comes in Maitreyi Pushpa's gender politics. Critics tend to celebrate the writer's feminist aesthetics by focusing on the portrayal of active women agents, as the quote above indicates. I suggest, however, that the delineation of male characters also constitutes a significant part in conveying her outlook for the gender question. As we shall see in my following analysis, the writer clearly, if not intentionally, arranges divergent life trajectories for her women and men characters respectively. Whereas the women characters manage to survive their struggles and become agents to generate change, the male figures in the novel end up confused, crushed and destined to fail in their lives. Anita Vashishta also questions whether it is an overly idealistic or implausible arrangement that all the main female characters in *Idannamam* and *Cāk*, and we could include *Almā Kabūtarī*, complete their transformation by becoming political leaders in the end.[1] I read this as the writer's preference for women characters, who, as Pushpa herself, believed themselves agents qualified and able to shoulder the responsibility of generating social transformation. Let us begin with the character who, by virtue of being at the centre of most relationships in the novel and occupying most narrative space, can be considered its true protagonist, Kadambai.

Kadambai

Kadambai, a beautiful young woman belonging to the second of three generations of Kabutaras in the novel, is introduced in the very beginning of the novel when the narrator recounts Mansaram's "plight". The opening highlights her

[1] Vashishta, 'Redefining Feminine Space and Aesthetics: A Study of Maitreyi Pushpa's Edennmam and Chaak'.

stunning beauty and indicates that her association with Mansaram poses a serious challenge to the Kabutara man of good lineage:

> *Gorā-ujalā ceharā. Choṭā māthā, sutavāṁ nāk. Nāk meṁ nagajaṛī maisī-sī loṁg. Āṁkhoṁ meṁ camakdār najar. Aṁḍākār cehare kī nukīlī ṭhoṛī par gudane kī būṁd! Kyā-kyā batalāeṁ maṁsārām, man ke darpaṇ meṁ samāī hai barajor. lāl ghāgharā, pīlī oṛhanī aur harī kurtī! Dubalī-patalī kay—kadambāī chalakar kahāṁ se calī? bīssālā laṛakī.* (9)
>
> Fair, radiant face. Small brow, pert nose. On the nose a studded nose pin faded of colour. Eyes glancing bright. On the trim chin of her oval face, a tattoo dot. What else can Mansaram list? The wanton lies engraved in his mind. Red ghagra, yellow dupatta and green shirtlette. Thin slender frame: with her sinister, sinuous grace, from whither to where had Kadam lured him on? A girl barely twenty.[1]

This detailed depiction of Kadambai's figure, part of Mansaram's memory featured on the very first page of the novel, reflects his perspective and is focalised through him. A beautiful woman from the inferior Kabutara community captures a Kajja man's attention—a subtle but unmistakeable sensuality comes in. The reader awaits expectantly the following sequence between the two characters. The sexual encounter does indeed take place, when Kadambai is waiting desirously for her husband Jangalia, who has been advised to lie low and leave the *bastī* after committing a theft at Mansaram's instigation. Mansaram comes to the *bastī* and, impersonating Jangalia, has sex with Kadambai. The sexual encounter between the two has its own narrative significance resulting in the birth of their mixed-caste child Rana, an important character who pushes the plot foward. However, the sexual sequence itself invites further elaboration.

> *Gehūṁ ke paudhe hare the aur ghane bhī—ek-dūsare se bhiṛe hue. Kadam kī chātiyoṁ se oṛhanī kī tarah lipaṭ gae. Vah jahāṁ khaṛī thī, paudhe bhī khaṛe the. Leṭa gaī to saṁg bich gae. ṭhaṁḍe aur*

[1] The phrase "with her sinister, sinuous grace" does not appear in the original Hindi text. The translator may intend to reinforce the fact that Kadambai is sexually attracted to Mansaram and it is a disastrous for him.

naram…Kadambāī sukha-seja par pauṛhī thī. Caṁdramā māthe par thā, sārā raṁg sunharā ho calā. Sarag se ujhakatī taraiyāṁ, kadambāī lajā gaī… Kadam ne ghāgharā khud hī nīce ko sarakā diyā. Baṁd āṁkhoṁ meṁ apne hī gore badan kī chāyā jagamagāī. Āṁkhoṁ par rakhe hāthoṁ kī uṁgaliyoṁ se jhāṁkanā cāhtī thī ki garm sāṁsoṁ ne hoṁṭhoṁ par kabjā kar liyā. Sāre ḍar-bhayoṁ ko dabāne kī khātir usane apane puruṣ ko bhīṁc liyā. Ānaṁd lok meṁ vicaranevālī kadamabāī, dogunī tākat se bhiṛ rahī thī. Milan kī ḍor se baṁdhī strī har lamhe naī se naī mudrāeṁ apanāne lagī. Ab keval vah hī vah thī, bākī koī na thā. Deh para bojha nahīṁ, sirph laharеṁ thīṁ. Bāṁheṁ! Kahāṁ, bhīṁcate jāne kī hoṛ ke kasāv the. Dharatī, dharatī na thī deh ke sāth uṭhatī-dabatī cādar! Āsamān, āsamān na thā. Tāroṁ kā jhamakatā jhūlanā… der tak vah taraṁgoṁ ke sāth khelatī rahī. Dharatī se ākāś tak jhūlane par savār! (22)

> The wheat plants, green and dense, entwining with each other clung to Kadam's breast like her odhni. Whenever and wherever she lay down they lay with her. Cool and soft, Kadambai lay cradled on her bed of plants. On her forehead glittered a jewel like the full moon, giving her a golden hue. The high tides of desire leaping within her, Kadambai became a little shy…Kadam slipped her ghagra down. The shadow of her own jasmine-white body gleamed in her closed eyes. She wanted to peek through the fingers of her hand covering her eyes, but a volcano of hot breathing sealed her lips. To keep down the wave of fear surging within she embraced her man fiercely. Secured by the cord of union she twisted and untwisted into ever-new patterns by the instant. Afloat on the currents of rapture, Kadambai duelled her mate with redoubled energy. There was only she who mattered now, none other. Weightless, her body moved as on waves. The earth was not earth, but a raiment rising and sinking with her body. The sky was no sky but a shining swing of stars… For long, unending hours, she sported with the currents of the swing that swung from the earth to the sky.

A sentence following this sequence indicates Mansaram's take on what has happened— "Mansaram thought, I have committed rape" (*Maṁsārām ne socā—maiṁne balātkār kar liyā*, 22)—and seems to define the whole affair as a rape. But is it? The depiction suggests a different explanation. While a rape is always associated with refusal, resistance and violence, as we shall see in *Tarpaṇ* and *Phāṁs*, both of which feature scenes of attempted sexual assault, it is however difficult to identify even a single trace of dissent here in this depiction. Instead, the quote describes the erotic moment explicitly but in a beautiful way with poetic metaphors. The point

here is that the narrator intentionally chooses Kadambai as the focaliser, and it is from her perspective that the whole process is recounted. Far from a rape victim, Kadambai was expectantly waiting for this moment to come and is fully engaged; the sexual encounter brings her pleasure rather than suffering. Here, this beautiful depiction generates a sense of uncertainty and ambiguity: does Kadambai know that the man she is making love to is not her husband? Should the reader take her view or Mansaram's? Is it a rape at all?

> *Man hī man cāhā hai unheṁ. Kajjā mard kī icchā kī thī. Aisā na hotā to maṁsārām us rāt apane khet meṁ āsānī se mauj kar jāte? Bāṁhoṁ meṁ bāṁh phaṁsate hī aṭapaṭā-sā lagā thā. Vah jaṁgaliyā kabūtarā kā akkhaṛ bhiṁcāva nahīṁ thā, mulāyam paras aur alag tarah se cūmanā... dabānā... aurat palabhar nahīṁ lagātī pahacān meṁ.* (37)
>
> In her heart of hearts she had loved him. For she had wanted a man of the kajjas. If it hadn't been so, could Mansaram have done what he did in the fields that night? His very clasp had felt different. It wasn't Jangalia's impetuous embrace. It was a soft touch and a different way of kissing, of caressing. A woman doesn't take a minute to tell.

The quote, a portrayal of Kadambai's psychology, opens a door for the reader to enter her complex inner world of unspoken thoughts and emotions—while knowing the man is not her husband, she actually wants it to happen and enjoys their sexual encounter. Taking into consideration the position of both Mansaram as a Kajja man and Kadambai a young Kabutara woman, the reader tends to naturally understand the incident as a sexual exploitation, or, as Mansaram puts it, a rape. For Mansaram, his advantage in terms of masculinity and higher status is supposed to maintain the liaison under his control—that is the reason why he naturally believes it is a rape. On the very contrary, what we see here is how Kadambai negotiates Mansaram's dominance by sticking to her own will and agency in making the choice— "she had wanted a man of the kajjas". At this moment, in fact, instead of

being subject to Mansaram, Kadambai maintains control of her own body and shifts from a supposed passive figure to a *de facto* proactive role in the encounter, posing a strong challenge to, or in a way having "ruined", to use the original term from the text, Mansaram's status and patriarchal dominance. While Mansaram becomes the person twisted around Kadambai's finger, Kadambai sticks to her desire and courageously expresses it through her bodily reactions.

The assertiveness of Kadambai goes beyond her commitment to her true desire and her ability to negotiate the Kajja man's dominance. With Rana's birth, Kadambai also becomes a mother. She lies to her community about Rana's father in order to protect her child. The mixed identity of "half Kajja and half Kabutara" is not only bothersome for Rana to bear with, it also affects Kadambai. She feels bewildered by her lie when the name of Mansaram is evoked on Rana's six-day birth ceremony, and the metaphor of the boat evokes a lack of control.

> *Kadam man hī man naṁgī ho gaī. Do pitāoṁ ke bīc phaṁsī māṁ... Kabhī kabūtarā-bastī khīṁcatī hai to kabhī thapeṛā ātā hai, maṁsārām ke gāṁv kī or nāv khene lagatī hai. Kul milākar ḍūb rahī hai vah. Donoṁ kināre dūr hote cale jā rahe haiṁ. Nav ke ḍāṁḍ hāth se chūṭ rahe haiṁ.* (34)
>
> Kadam felt stripped somewhere within her. She's a mother caught between two fathers. Her kabutara settlement sometimes pulls her boat towards itself. And sometimes the tide rocks it with a rough wind and she paddles towards Mansaram's village. In the final reckoning she is drowning. Both the shores are receding. The oars are slipping from her hands.

It is a beautiful metaphor that reveals the dilemma Kadambai has put herself in. The confusion however does not stop Kadambai from celebrating the coming of her son. Kadambai prioritises Rana in her life, and her assertion of motherhood also becomes manifest through her stream of consciousness. Motherhood, a testimony of her womanhood, makes her proud:

> *Kadambāī kahnā cāhtī thī —... Us rāt gehūṁ ke paudhoṁ kī hariyal sej ke ūpar āsmān meṁ tāre jhamak rahe the. Biravā ropā jā rahā thā. Ropanevalā na jaṁgaliyā thā na maṁsārām. Dharatī sī harī bharī eka aurat thī, vah jisakā bhī aṁś sādhanā cāhatī thī, sādh liyā. Samay batāegā ki yah baccā na kajjā hai na kabūtarā. Ādamī hai, bas.* (35)
>
> Kadambai wanted to say…that night, stars shone on the sky above the green bed of the wheat stalks. It was sowing time. The sower was neither Mansaram nor Jangalia. There was a woman, green and fecund like the earth, and she took in whatever she wanted to. Time will tell that this child is neither a kajja nor a kabutara. He is a human, that's all.

Kadambai moves from this assertion of Rana's "simple humanity" (neither a Kajja or a Kabutara) to the aspiration that he becomes a true Kabutara, an heir identity of the community on both spiritual and practical levels. On the spiritual level, as we saw in a previous quote, Kadambai strains to inspire Rana with heroism and bravery, and wants Rana to adopt a hostile attitude towards the oppressive Kajjas. On the practical level, Kadambai trains Rana to learn their traditional livelihood in order to make him a true Kabutara. She understands the rules to survive in the tribe—only by accepting the customs and practices of the community can one win respect. Mansaram also plays a role in this. Kadambai's complex and conflicted sentiments towards Mansaram are reflected in her treatment of Rana. She loves Mansaram and therefore does not want Rana to develop a strong hatred for his real father. When Rana raises a question regarding him, for instance, Kadambai always chooses not to answer it directly and diverts the subject. At the same time, the fact that Mansaram cannot fulfil his responsibilities as a normal husband to her and father to Rana brings her insecurity. She therefore projects her aspirations onto her son, training Rana to become a qualified Kabutara so that they can lead a life independent from Mansaram. There seems to be an invisible competition going on between Kadambai and Mansaram, with Rana's future as the trophy for the winner. The narrator reveals what bubbles inside Kadambai when she comes to know that Rana

has no interest in the so-called traditional skills but inclines towards learning. In her mind, Mansaram is to blame:

> *Yah rāṇā nahīṁ, kadambāī ko maṁsārām to nahīṁ lalkār rahe? Karan paṛhatā hai to vah kyoṁ na paṛhe?... Maṁsārām, tum kabūtarī ko kamajor karnā cāhte ho yā barbād? rāṇā ko darasal patā nahīṁ ki tum uske bāp ho, ki tum uske bappā ke hatyāre ho. Abhī tak chipāe rahī. Chipānā nahīṁ cāhtī thī phir bhī.... Ab use aise rog mat lagāo jinkī davā na ho. Abhī tak chipāe rahī. Chipānā nahīṁ cāhtī thī phir bhī.... Ab use aise rog mat lagāo jinkī davā na ho.* (54)
>
> Is it Mansaram and not Rana who is throwing a challenge to her? Is he asking, if Karan goes to school, why shouldn't Rana? Mansaram, do you want to weaken me, a poor kabutari, or do you want to ruin me? Rana does not know that you are his father, that you are the murderer of his ordained father. I have hidden it all along. I didn't want to, but yet—Now don't you infect him with incurable diseases. Studies and so forth are for you people. For us, they are deadweights.

As we have seen so far, Kadambai's characterisation is achieved mainly through the representations of her inner thoughts. This is a significant device in that it not only helps build a rounded, complex character, but also constructs the feminist discourse that the author intends to frame. In other words, her commitment to her own womanhood and desire is revealed by the portrayal of her internal world. The focus on her stream of consciousness propels the plot and meets the reader's questions. For example, when the reader is wondering how to understand the "rape" scene, Kadambai's inner thoughts reveal that she successfully negotiates Mansaram's dominance at that particular moment. The narrative grants the reader access to the interior world of the character and the distant between the reader and the character is minimised. The reader is no longer an observer but becomes a participant who goes through the various moments of mental turmoil together with the character. However, this psychological characterisation also creates a tension between the narrator and the character. While the narrator generally narrates on

behalf of the character (whose thoughts are expressed in the third person), at moments of heightened tension the character intentionally (or unconsciously) "encroaches" upon the function of the narrator and the third-person perspective becomes first-person. When Rana is about to leave for Goramachhiya to live and study with Ram Singh, at the end of the sixth chapter, this is how Kadambai reacts to the prospect:

> *Māthe par hāth dharkar bīc gaila meṁ ek hāth se peṭ pakaṛkar baiṭha gaī kadambāī. Phaphak-phaphakkar rone lagī. Pīṭh, peṭ, āṁkheṁ, nāk, hoṁṭa…pūrā badan ro rahā hai. Maiṁ terī dubalī deh aur bhole cehare ko dekhkar jīne kī tākat juṭātī rahī re… Apnī bhūkh–pyās meṁ nahīṁ, terī cintā meṁ jindā rahtī thī. Ājh rāmsiṁh us phikar se bhī ājād kar calā! Rāṇā re…terī māṁ vīrān…Ab cintā meṁ nahīṁ, dukh meṁ ḍūb jāegī, jo dukh tere bichoh ne paidā kar ḍālā.* (111)
>
> Hand clasped to her forehead, Kadambai sat down in the middle of the road, clutching at her stomach with one hand. Sobs wracked her. Her back, stomach, eyes, nose, lip, her whole body, wept. I kept gathering the strength to live by looking at your skinny body and innocent face, son. Not in anxiety at my hunger and thirst but in anxiety for you, I lived on, on. Today Ram Singh is freeing me even from that life-giving anxiety! Your mother is desolate, son! Now she will drown, not in anxiety, but in grief for you, the grief that your departure has given birth to.

What we see here is an unexpected shift of perspective and the abrupt emergence of "*maiṁ*" (I) to express Kadambai's sorrow of parting with her son. The character at this particular moment addresses the reader directly and this "*maiṁ*" blurs the boundary between the narrator and the character. It is difficult for the reader to tell who is actually speaking here—Kadambai is definitely the subject, but this "*maiṁ*" also implies the tone of the narrator. As Kadambai's character's point of view becomes dominant, this "encroachment" adds to the intensity of the heartbreak. The character of Kadambai manifests the two main elements of Maitreyi Pushpa's feminism—the control of the body and the assertion of motherhood and womanhood.

Although Kadambai is allocated considerable narrative space as a major character embodying the writer's feminist ideas, prior to her, Bhuri is actually the first woman of the modern-day community to carry on the feminine assertion inherited from Rani Pamini.

Bhuri

Bhuri, the first generation of the Kabutara community, is already dead when the novel begins. Although her story is very short, spanning only five pages in chapter 4, she is a crucial character and an inspiring torchbearer for the following generations. Unlike other Kabutaras who have internalised the criminal tribe narrative, Bhuri, a free, independent and resilient woman, believes in their glorious past linked to Rani Padmini and that the people should have already been freed from the criminal stigma. I contend that the narrator intentionally makes this character a modern embodiment of Rani Padmini's spirit, characterised by the free will to live. As Bhuri's story comes before the alternative history in the novel, the reader is thus prepared to accept the modified version of Rani Padmini's story because of this modern parallel.

Three important decisions that Bhuri made in her life mark her out as a special figure and a rebel in the Kabutara community. First, disguising herself as a Kajja to avoid trouble, also a hint of her son Ram Singh's life, Bhuri went to Jhansi despite strong opposition from the community to meet the "king" of the nation, who declared the decriminalisation of the ex-criminal tribes.[1] And she truly believed that their community could enjoy equal rights because of the declaration, about which her people remained highly doubtful. This choice separated Bhuri from other Kabutaras,

[1] Without mentioning who the "king" is, the narrative only provides a portrayal of his appearance — "wearing a white kurta and waistcoat, cap on head and red flower on his waistcoat … such a lightweight of a man and a king!" It can be tentatively inferred that this "king" is Nehru.

making her a potential rebel who would opt for an alternative life path. The second choice was that instead of becoming a *sati* after the death of her husband, Bhuri, following her indomitable will to live, escaped the *bastī*, as Padmini did in the alternative history rather than sacrificing her life. It was then Bhuri's life began to evoke the struggle of Rani Padmini. Again, Bhuri's inner thoughts reveal the motivation behind her choice and link her to Padmini:

> *Bhūrī anḍhī kī tarah cār mahīne ke rāmsiṁh ko god meṁ lekar vīrsiṁh ke dhyān meṁ khaṛī thī. Khaṛī-khaṛī kaul bhar rahī thī—pativirtā lugāī apne ādamī ke saṁg satī hotī hai. Maiṁ apne mard kī byāhtā khud ko tab mānūṁgī, jab rāmsiṁh ko paṛhā-likhākar isī kacaharī ke darvāje khaṛā kar dūṁgī. Bhale is saphar meṁ mujhe das mardoṁ ke nīce se gujarnā paṛe. padminī kī kathā maiṁne sūnī hai.* (74)
>
> Blind to everything, Bhoorie stood, praying to the dead Veer Singh, holding the four-month-old Ram Singh in her arms. Standing, child in arms, she took a vow—the chaste woman commits sati with her dead husband. But I shall consider myself married again to my man when I put Ram Singh through school and college and bring him here to the court. Never mind if in this effort I am gang raped by ten men. I know the story of Padmini.

Like Padmini, Bhuri chose to live rather than sacrifice herself. Her struggle was as difficult. The point here, as we see in the quote, is that it was Bhuri's own choice to prostitute herself to survive at the expense of her reputation, a commitment to the control of her own body. Apart from straining to survive as Padmini did, Bhuri's third choice was her determination to educate Ram Singh, hoping that education could empower him and eventually lift him out of the subordination. Although Bhuri was successful in fulfilling the responsibilities of motherhood, education fails to turn her son into a true Kajja.

Bhuri is an indispensable character to the narrative not only because she connects the ancestral saga of the community to its modern predicament but also because she motivates the following generation to carry on her incomplete struggle. Alma is the person following her path.

Alma

Ram Singh's daughter Alma belongs to the third generation of the Kabutara women in the novel. A beautiful young woman like Kadambai, Alma leads a very different life from other Kabutara women. Growing up in the Goramachhiya village like a Kajja, Alma is well educated and protected from harsh life in the *bastī* by her father Ram Singh. Yet I suggest that Alma constitutes an integral part of the Bhuri-Kadambai-Alma continuity, embodying the resilience inherited from the previous generations. She is also the female agent who carries on the unfinished struggle of the Kabutara women.

The novel is supposed to revolve around Alma, as the title *Almā Kabūtarī* suggests.[1] Yet, it is difficult to identify her as the protagonist—she does not appear until chapter eight, almost halfway into the narrative. Alma is not even the focaliser in most of the accounts dedicated to her; instead, her story is told through the memories of the two young men, Rana and Dheeraj, who develop affection respectively for her during their interactions. In addition, instead of being controlled by herself, Alma's life trajectory appears to be led by random encounters and coincidences, situations in which she is constantly subject to men. After Ram Singh's death, she is first entrusted to his "friend" Durjan, who then sells her to Surajbhan, a dacoit. Surajbhan holds Alma captive and plans to present her to local leaders in exchange for political favours. After escaping Surajbhan's clutches, Alma finally becomes associated with the dacoit-turned-politician Shriram Shastri. This unexpected development of Alma's story has invited criticism, which, I suggest, fails

[1] There are other debates around the title of the novel. In a review, for example, Ajay Navaria reflects from the perspective of a Hindi native speaker, contending that the fact that both *Almā* and *Kabūtarī* are immediately alien to the readers is "generating anxiety". See Ajay Navaria, 'Almā Kabūtarī: Jijīviṣā Kī Tān Aur Jiṁdagī Kī Rāginī', in *Maitreyī Pushpā: Strī Hone Kī Kathā*, ed. Vijay Bahadur Singh (New Delhi: Kitabghar Prakashan, 2011), 176–86.

to put this character in the context of the collective saga.[1] Instead I read Alma's journey, imbued with so many twists and turns, as a continuation of Bhuri's and Kadambai's, and she is the person shouldering the responsibility to carry on the unfinished struggle, as the following quote reveals:

> *Magara almā apanī bān nahīṁ choṛegī. Mare yā rahe? Almā mane ātmā, bappā ne soc-samajhkar nām rakhā thā, kahate the ātmā nahīṁ martī. Pitā kā saṃkalp bīc meṃ hī laṛakhaṛā gayā, gam nahīṁ, rāṇā bhram kā śikār ho gayā, koī bāt nahīṃ. Kadambāī, almā kī aguā, jaise bhūrī kadambāī kī aguā thī. Yah juṛatī huī kaṛī kahāṁ se kahāṁ taka jātī hai.* (347)
>
> But Alma will not give up her principles. Even if she dies. Alma means Atma, the soul. Bappa had named her with much thought. He said the Atma never dies. Bappa's vows wavered mid-way, but no matter. Rana became prey to illusion, never mind. Kadambai was Alma's forerunner, as Bhoori was Kadambai's. How far, behind and ahead, does this chain of sequence and consequence stretch.

Far from lacking personal agency, Alma's life journey characterised by her attachment to different men actually resonates with the assertion in the quote—"Alma means Atma, the soul … Atma never dies". After undergoing various forms of extreme hardship, including being mortgaged, abducted, and sexually exploited, instead of giving up on her own life, Alma is still able to preserve her inner power. The fact that Alma continues to be in thrall to different men resembles the life of Rani Padmini, who was the spoils of the war between two men, while Alma's indomitable will to live evokes both Padmini and Bhuri.

Moreover, Alma resembles her predecessor Kadambai in terms of the control over her body. She is honest about her feminine desires and expresses them overtly without any hesitation. For example, after they have sex for the first time, Rana asks

[1] Raising questions about Alma's characterisation, Ramsharan Joshi, for instance, writes, "the last quarter of the narrative turns out to be out of control. Although the writer makes great efforts and struggle to bring Alma's character back to track, she fails to do so anyway. Instead of getting the story to the destination, she pushes the theme onto another track where it crashes." See Ramsharan Joshi, 'Almā Kabūtarī: Gustākh Savāloṁ Kā Khataranāk Upanyās', in *Maitreyī Pushpā: Strī Hone Kī Kathā*, ed. Vijay Bahadur Singh (New Delhi: Kitabghar Prakashan, 2011), 169.

Alma if she has ever had such an experience. Alma responds, “Stupid! Don’t you have even this little know-how? Your body guides you! You don’t need experience” (*Dhat, itnā bhī nahīṁ jānte. Apnī deh to batā detī hai sabkuch*, 182). Evoking Kadambai’s choice, Alma takes a step further by taking the initiative—she even complains to Rana that they always sleep separately despite living under the same roof.

However, their romantic relationship fails to develop further because Rana suddenly leaves Alma after finding out Ram Singh’s dirty secret. Rana, who was supposed to be Alma’s protector, thus falls short of his promise. The separation lands Alma in a situation where she has to go through the trials and tribulations on her own. In addition to an exceptionally strong and resilient personality, Alma also demonstrates softness, sentimentality and the emotional attachment to Rana, making her a rounded character. In a letter to Rana she writes:

> *Mere rāṇā, tum cale gae. Lagtā hai ki tum yahīṁ ho. Āhaṭ–sī āspās rahtī hai. Yādoṁ se dukh kabhī baṛhtā hai to kabhī ghaṭtā hai. Tamām tasvīreṃ man meṁ phaṛphaṛātī haiṃ. Lagā ki tum nahīṁ ho to merī jān bhī jāne lagī. Man ḍūbne lagā. Najar dhuṁdhlī hone lagī. khālī ghar meṃ dam detī almā ko ek bār dekh jāte. Akelī rahā kartī thī, tum ā gae. Cale jāne ke bād akelāpan kaī gunā baṛh gayā.* (242)
>
> My Rana, you have gone. It feels as if you are here. Your footfalls seem to be around always. Memories sometimes heighten the pain, sometimes lessen it. Pictures flutter in my mind, pictures of everything. I felt that with you not here, my life would go too, my heart drown, my vision wane. You could come just once to see Alma dying in the empty house. I lived alone before you came, was lonely. But after you going away, my loneliness has increased manifold.

This expression of her emotion is significant for Alma’s characterisation, and the directness and intimacy of the letter makes her step into the foreground and engage directly with the reader. All at once Alma becomes a more tangible and clear

character instead of the blurred and slightly mysterious one we perceive from the other characters' perspectives.

Alma's characterisation changes as the narrative moves forward. At the end of the novel, after regaining freedom from the custody, Alma gradually acquires more narrative space and emerges into the centre, a sign that Alma has now fully gained her agency. After seeking refugee with Shriram Shastri, Alma becomes an invaluable helper for the illiterate and rustic minister thanks to her literate knowledge. Their intimacy gradually develops to a point where Alma is regarded as Shastri's wife. After the politician is murdered allegedly by his political opponent, Alma is given an opportunity to take advantage of the power vacuum. The ending, allegedly indicating that Alma is stepping into the political arena as a Kabutara woman leader in place of Shriram Shastri, marks the success of their struggle, a total transformation from reacting to constraints to taking a proactive approach to life with substantial political power.

The characterisation of the Bhuri-Kadambai-Alma trio follows a similar pattern, characterised by their assertiveness, independence and resilience in searching for the feminine selfhood and in negotiating the exploitation because of both their criminal stigma and gender. From one generation to another, the struggle of the Kabutara women carries on. What about the male characters? Are the Kabutara men, like the three Kabutara women, also represented as agents of resistance straining to challenge the Kajjas' domination?

Ram Singh and Rana

Male characters also play a significant part in articulating Maitreyi Pushpa's feminist politics. A juxtaposition between female and male characters, I suggest, helps illustrate the ways they are treated differently in the narrative. In contrast to the

consistency in the characterisation of Bhuri, Kadambai and Alma, who courageously maintain full control over their bodies and inherit the tradition of struggle from Rani Padmini, the male Kabutara characters are not on a par with their female counterparts in terms of surmounting constraints and challenging encounters. Although both Ram Singh and Rana have the potential of generating transformation for themselves and potentially for the community, because they are the only educated Kabutara men who do not practice their traditional livelihood, neither, however, succeeds in the task. In fact, they turn out to be anti-heroes. The life trajectories of these two male characters might make the reader wonder, as if they are destined to fail. In that sense, the writer here does not conform to the "good Dalits" paradigm of Dalit texts, where the low-caste characters tend to uphold moral principles when they counteract high-caste exploitation and manipulation. In the novel, on the one hand it is difficult to claim that Ram Singh and Rana are morally good, but on the other neither of them is compensated for the brutality they have endured. I argue that this evident polarisation in characterisation of female and male Kabutara characters forms an important part of the writer's feminist assertion. Why cannot the novel portray a successful Kabutara man? I read this as the writer's preference for women characters, who are invested with the capability and agency to survive and generate social transformation. The failure of the male characters only sets off the success of their female counterparts. As Vashishta puts it, "Maitreyi Pushpa steps in at a crucial moment today to re-construct feminist politics for genuine social transformation from women's point of view".[1]

Ram Singh's fate exemplifies the risks of straddling both the Kajja and the Kabutara worlds. He fails to come to terms with the situation in which he is no longer seen as a Kabutara by his own people, on the one hand, but nor can he ever be

[1] Vashishta, 'In between: Locating Tradition and Modernity in the Works of Maitreyi Pushpa', 131.

treated as a real Kajja. In the Kajja world, Ram Singh has no choice but to try to survive in a tight corner. It is this identity crisis that contributes to Ram Singh's abnormal life as well as his eventual death. I have mentioned in the previous section how Ram Singh is ill-treated by the police, despite the fact that he is an educated schoolmaster leading a Kajja life. In the face of total humiliation, Ram Singh even begins to question what exactly education has brought to his life. In a set of rhetorical questions charged with strong emotion, he addresses his late mother Bhuri:

> *Māṁ! Maiṁ kitnā vajan uṭhāūṁ? Jāhil rahkar ādmī bahut kuch takdīr ke sahāre ḍho le jātā hai. Jāhil hī kyoṁ nahīṁ rahne diyā mujhe? Samajhdārī ne jagah-jagah beijjat karāyā.* (103)
>
> Ma, how much more weight am I to carry? Why didn't you let me be an illiterate? As an illiterate, a man leaves a lot to fate and lightens his shoulders. Education has only brought me insults.

On top of the failure to live like a Kajja, Ram Singh is distanced from the Kabutara community. When he comes back to the *bastī* for Rana, people gawk at him as if at a superior outsider:

> *Rāmasiṁha kā rutabā har dil par chāyā huā hai. Caik meṃ log juṛ gae, jaise uske darśan karnā cāhte hoṁ. Maliyā ne logoṁ ko aisī najaroṁ se dekhā, jaise kah rahā ho—Dekho, rāṇā kī kis bhagvān ko jarūrat hai!* (106)
>
> Ram Singh's reputation had preceded him. The people crowded the yard outside for a look. Malia looked at the people as if to say, look, this is the god that Rana needs.

Ram Singh is confused by such a split in his life. On the one hand, he is the person who recounts the Kabutara version of the Rani Padmini tale, which glorifies the noble past of the community, rejects their criminal stigma, and incorporates them into the nationalist imagination. This suggests that Ram Singh could be a highly promising character equipped with a resistant and radical spirit. On the other hand, in order to survive the Kajjas' oppression, Ram Singh chooses to surrender and

cooperate and plays the role of a go-between in the dirty deal between the police and local dacoits. Apart from his decent job teaching at school, Ram Singh also provides medical treatment to unknown people, who turn out to be his fellow Kabutaras. Yet by handing these Kabutaras to the police so that they kill them in fake encounters in place of real dacoits, Ram Singh maintains his Kajja lifestyle by betraying his own community. Ram Singh himself is also tragically sacrificed by the police to save a local dacoit leader. Apart from presenting a critique of the exploitative local police, Ram Singh's tragedy shows up his powerlessness when he gets stuck between the pressure from the police and the commitment to his own community. Showing understanding of her father's anguish, Alma writes in a letter:

> *Din par din tamāśe baṛhne lage. Bappā ḍagamagāte gae. Sir par baṁdhī śān-śaukat kī pagṛī aur gāṁva kī logoṃ kī rām-rām-sītārām kāṭne ko dauṛatī. kyoṃki sīdhā savāl hotā—rāmsiṁh, do kabūtarā dene hoṁge, do mujrim rihā karne haiṁ. Magar sajā pūrī karānī hai. Ve kaun haiṁ? kyā haiṁ? bappā nahīṃ pūch sakte, bas apne man ko samjhā lete—corī karate haiṁ, tab bhī to jea kāṭte haiṃ. Hamāre yahāṁ jel meṁ rahnā, jiṃdā rahnā hai. maiṁ unko maut se bacāe rahūṁgā. Maut duniyā kī sabse burī aur bhayānak cīj hai… Pulis bhī bappā ko mānne lagī, unkā kām āsān kar denevāle bappā. Jindā rahne ke lie kahīṁ se bhī gujar rahe the. Tumko pard meṁ rakhā, kyoṁki bhītar hī bhītar jānate the, jo kar rahe haiṁ, vah kahīṁ galat hai. Par rām-nām-sī jindakī, sumirnā jarūrī ho gayā. Nahīṁ to bhav kī bhaṁvar hī bhaṁvar.* (242-43)

> Day by day the tamashas increased. Bappa floundered more. On his head he wore the turban of pride and standing, while secretly the people greetings of ram-ram and sita-ram, bit him. For the demands came straight—Ram Singh, you'll have to give us two kabutaras. Two criminals have to be released. But their sentences have to finish. Who were they? What were they? Bappa could not ask. He simply consoled himself with the thought, don't the kabutaras go to jail when they steal? For us going to jail is a way of keeping alive. I shall be keeping them safe from death. Death is the worst and most fearful thing in the world…The police too began to value Bappa, Bappa, who made their task easy. To keep alive we went through anything and everything. We kept you in the dark, because he knew in his heart of hearts that what he was doing was wrong. But life is short, like the name of Ram. To think of god became urgent. Otherwise it would be the snares of life without end.

According to this quote, although Ram Singh knows that his cooperation with the police is morally wrong, he is unable to extricate himself from it. His surrender to the intimidation of the police, a sign of weakness, makes him a non-innocent victim.

Similarly, Rana is another Kabutara character who is presented as a potential agent for change but ends up being a helpless anti-hero. Rana, whose name is derived from the historical hero Rana Pratap, carries the hope of the community. Although Rana's preference for study distinguishes him from his Kabutara peers, the humiliation he experiences because of the identity in the village school casts early shadows over his bright future. In order to continue his studies, he has no choice but to move to Goramachhiya and live with Ram Singh. During his stay there, he acquires a taste for the modern Kajja lifestyle, and develops a romantic relationship with Alma, as I have already mentioned. When the reader starts to expect Rana's promise to develop, the way he perceives his home gradually changes over time:

> *Do sāl bīt gae, apnī hī jindagī kī gudaṛī udheṛtā rahtā hai. Māṁ se riśtā kaṭā-sā hai, almā se joṛa liyā, vah bhī apnī nahīṁ. Cāhe to bhī bāp se bāhar nahīṁ jā saktī. Pyār-prīti kāhe kī? Sab naklī cījeṁ haiṁ. Indrajāl-sā yah ghar, bhītar ke kapaṭ ko koī nahīṁ nikāl saktā.* (177)
>
> Two years had passed, he was still turning over the patchwork quilt of his life. With his mother it seemed as if a relationship had snipped off. He made a new one with Alma. But Alma too was not his. Even if she wanted to, she could not break free of her father. What were love and so on? False, all of them lies! This house, too, a maze that nobody could fathom.

The quote reveals that Rana experiences a similar dilemma to Ram Singh. A feeling of alienation pervades him—he has not only lost the connection with his mother, but also failed to be fully assimilated into his new home. Ram Singh and Alma do not seem to regard him as a full family member. Compared to the three women, and even to Ram Singh, Rana is a highly confused character who lacks commitment to

his own will and is unable to come to terms with his circumstances. As this confusion builds up with time, Rana begins to question his position in this family, believing that Ram Singh is to blame for his current predicament:

> *Rāṇā ko alag se yah gahrā dukh thā ki cāroṁ kī ṭolī se vah chiṭkāyā huā ... Anumān lagātā rahtā hai, sāf-sāf nahīṁ dekha pātā. Kabhī-kabhī muṁh se manmānī gāliyāṁ nikaltī haiṁ, jo cupcāp havā meṁ kho jātī haiṁ—maiṁ tumhārī dehrī kā kuttā hūṁ kyā? Yā tum log rājā maṅtrī ho? Apnoṁ ko ṭhukrākar calā āyā, aur yahāṁ śāmil na ho sakā. Mere apne kākā bhaiyā, mere bhale ke lie hī to mujhe toṛte the. Apne kābile meṁ milāne ke lie sajā dete the aur khud bhī dukhī ho jāte the. Unhoṁne jātī se alag karke apne meṁ milāne ke lie vivaś kiyā thā. Tumhāre chiṭkāne par āj maiṁ kuch dūsrī tarah socne par majbūr huā hūṁ.* (186)
>
> Rana felt a special ache that he was not quite part of the foursome. He inferred, speculated, could not see clearly. Sometimes rank abuses poured out of his mouth that vanished into thin air—Am I a dog at your threshold? Or are you people kings and ministers? I've shaken off those my own, and haven't been able to belong here. My own kaka, for my own good, upbraided me. Punished me and felt the pain himself, to induct me among his kin. He isolated me from my clan and forced me to come into his fold. Because of your boycott and indifference towards me, I am today forced to think differently.

In this quote, the lack of a sense of belonging keeps bubbling inside Rana. His confusion develops into anger and frustration. Ram Singh, who brought Rana here but alienates him at the same time, becomes the crux of the problem. Because of this alienation, the idea of going back to his own village Madora Khurd begins to take shape in Rana's mind. After accidentally finding out Ram Singh's dirty secret with the police, Rana becomes completely disillusioned. He then runs back to the Kabutara *bastī* to inform and save his people. Leaving Alma, Rana also breaks his promise to take care of her. Ram Singh's betrayal and the incomplete love with Alma gouge a deep wound in him, and he experiences a sudden and dramatic transformation and becomes an angry young man dreaming of settling things overnight by violence. Yet back in his own *bastī* Rana remains trapped in his personal crisis. As an educated and modern Kabutara man who is no longer

compatible with the Kabutara *bastī*, Rana feels isolated because no one in his community appreciates his value. This leads to his mental illness, and he remains sick and inactive for the rest of the narrative.

Compared to the three strong and determined female Kabutara characters, Ram Singh and Rana are both weak and confused. The dilemma over their identity, leading to their destruction, serves to illustrate the writer's feminist politics characterised by foregrounding the female characters.

The representation of the Kabutara community as a whole and the prioritisation of certain characters lead to my contemplation upon the role of the rural setting. Does the rural domain take on any narrative fuctions in terms of constructing a refashioned image of the community and of characterisation? In the next section, I turn to discussing the rural world in the novel.

The Rural Chronotope in *Almā Kabūtarī*

> With the emergence of Maitreyi Pushpa in the 1990s, the focus again turned to the agrarian sphere. In 1990 Pushpa began with the first of a series of novels and several collections of short stories that focused resolutely on the harsh conditions that characterised the rural world and the lives of peasant farmers in the district of Aligarh in Uttar Pradesh. In particular she highlighted the struggles of the rural gendered subaltern for autonomy, respect, and the ability to decide her own fate in a rural world dominated by an oppressive patriarchy in north India. It is therefore possible to argue that, together with several important self-identifying Dalit litterateurs, who also produced fictional works in which the rural world featured prominently, the emergence of Pushpa ushered in a return to the agrarian novel in Hindi at a time when the rural domain had well and truly disappeared from the lives of many urban inhabitants of South Asia.[1]

As an iconic woman writer in the contemporary Hindi literary topography, Maitreyi Pushpa is celebrated not only for her portrayals of assertive Indian female

[1] Delacy, 'Politics, Pleasure and Cultural Production', 117–18.

subjects, but also for the close and detailed depiction of the Indian village, its people, culture and socio-political dynamics.[1] As I have argued previously, rural themes continue to play a significant role in contemporary Hindi fiction, and it is thus disputable to argue that Maitreyi Pushpa "ushered in a return to the agrarian novel". The incessant focus on the Indian village that permeates her works nevertheless distinguishes this writer from her contemporary Hindi women authors. This section attempts a chronotopic approach to her depiction of the rural space in *Almā Kabūtarī*. For one thing, the narrative uses real toponyms to contribute to the identity formation of the Kabutaras, giving the impression that the narrator is documenting real tales of the community. But we may also track spatially the movement of characters within this rural world from *bastī* to village, village to *bastī,* from village to larger village, and from village to the regional town, a movement that is always associated with encounters between characters, encounters that serve as crucial moments pushing the plotline forward. The characters also develop their character arcs in the course of the movement. This expansive rural chronotope evokes the "road chronotope" proposed by Bakhtin rather the more limited village chronotope in her previous novel *Cāk*, or the binary movement between village and city of Premchand's *Godān*.[2] In addition, despite the everyday harshness experienced by the Kabutaras and the corrupt local politics featured in the narrative, the writer avoids portraying a completely abject and unlivable rural world. Instead, the establishment of the *ṭhekā* (legal liquor shop) in the *bastī*, turning it eventually into a prosperous place, I suggest, indicates the writer's positive attitude towards commercialisation which can potentially rejuvenate the Kabutaras' life in village.

[1] See Vijay Bahadur Singh, 'To Kyā Maitreyī Puṣpā Tasalīmā Nasarīn Haiṃ?', in *Maitreyī Pushpā: Strī Hone Kī Kathā*, ed. Vijay Bahadur Singh (New Delhi: Kitabghar Prakashan, 2011), 61–68; Rajnarayan Bohre, 'Bundelkhaṇḍ Kī Tasvīr', in *Maitreyī Pushpā: Tathya Aur Satya*, ed. Daya Dikshit (New Delhi: Samayik Books, 2010), 133–34.
[2] Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel', 243–45.

Almā Kabūtarī, as already mentioned, is set in Bundelkhand. The reader is first introduced to Madora Khurd, a small village (as the word *khurd* indicates) that is the first major setting in which the story develops. As the plot moves forward, more spaces emerge, and they jointly construct the rural chronotope of the novel. It should be noted that *Almā Kabūtarī* does not follow the pattern of Pushpa's previous novel *Cāk*, in which the storyline is mainly situated in a fictional village of Atarpur. Richard Delacy argues that the fictional village in *Cāk* could be understood to "stand in metonymically for the rural world of north India more broadly towards the end of twentieth century."[1] Instead, Madora Khurd, together with other locations in *Almā Kabūtarī*, such as Goramachhiya, Betwa River, and Chirgaon, etc., are not fictional. For instance, Madora Khurd is a village next to Khilli village where Maitreyi Pushpa spent her childhood; Goramachhiya is another nearby village close to the city of Jhansi. These real place names enhance the authenticity of the narrative, a device also employed in *Phāṁs*, as we shall see in chapter 3. At the same time, instead of making any single village a representative which can be applied to a wider north Indian context, the writer, I suggest, portrays an identifiable and specific rural arena dedicated to the Kabutaras. In other words, the people and their stories are supposed to be closely attached to the particular locality and clearly not to be transferable. Therefore, these real toponyms contribute to forming a unique identity for the Kabutaras, a major narrative aim of the novel.

But as *Almā Kabūtarī* encompasses an extended rural landscape comprised of different locations, the movement of characters between different places becomes a key feature that defines the trajectory of the storyline. This entire and expansive rural setting therefore resembles Bakhtin's "road chronotope", in which characters embark on adventures through various places, and it is unexpected encounters on the journey

[1] See Delacy, "Politics, Pleasure and Cultural Production", 132.

that form the plot.[1] In the first seven chapters of the novel, Madora Khurd remains the central locale for the story of the sexual liaison between Mansaram and Kadambai occurs. The liaison actually results from an unanticipated move of characters across two spaces, with Mansaram coming to the *bastī* to have sex with Kadambai. The spatial segregation, as in other Dalit-oriented narratives, marks the social disparity between the Kajjas and the Kabutaras. But here the boundary is actually porous, and crossing the boundary leads to many encounters. Driven by the desire for liquor, the Kajjas comes to the *bastī* for cheap illicit recreation. Their inferior status prevents the Kabutaras from crossing the boundary in reverse, except for stealing and robbing. Mansaram's border-crossing and the ensuing birth of Rana play a key role in the plot development. From chapter eight onwards, the narrative focus becomes divided. A new episode, featuring the relationship between Rana, Alma and Ram Singh, takes place in Goramachhiya, but Madora Khurd also witnesses transformation with the dynamics between Mansaram, Kadambai and the Kabutara community. The locale then shifts back to Madora Khurd again once Rana comes back there. From chapter fifteen onwards the narrative focus moves further to the district town Jhansi, featuring the captivity of Alma and her relationship with her warden Dheeraj. Different locales are thus closely associated with different characters. Like in the "road chronotope" in Bildungsroman, the characters in the novel develop arcs as they move from one place to another, but as we have seen, for male characters the arc tends to be a negative one. For instance, Rana turns from a promising young man into a complete anti-hero after coming back to Madora Khurd from Goramachhiya, whereas Alma gradually develops to a mature woman with agency to generate change as she goes through various places, and eventually becomes Shiram Shastri's associate in Jhansi. The various spaces in the rural world

[1] Bakhtin, 243–45.

and the movement of characters in it as their plotlines cross jointly constitute the complex chronotope of the novel.

One more point. In his analysis of *Cāk*, Delacy points out that one important feature that defines Pushpa's agrarian writing is the portrayal of "the rural world as one sunk in utter abjection":

> Pushpa's narrative takes place in a world that has become so completely corrupted, nepotistic, brutal, violent and oppressive, that the reader is compelled to ponder the possibility that this world no longer possesses any redeeming features.[1]

In *Almā Kabūtarī*, we see a similar picture of a rural world characterised by violence and unbridled oppression infused in everyday life of the Kabutaras. The village is represented as a dangerous, chaotic, lawless and corrupt space mired in institutionalised violence, in which the Kabutaras live in extremely deprived and fragile conditions—the men are victimised and the women brutalised. Life as a Kabutara in the village is anything but peaceful and easy. In addition to being easily under the sway of manipulation at the hands of the Kajjas, they have to face the unexpected brutal attacks from the police and the licensed liquor brewers. The police, which are supposed to be the protector and regulator, are ruthless and exploitative. The local political environment, dysfunctional and corrupt, is a cruel battlefield where local dacoit groups compete against each other for their own political interest. To use Delacy's words in the quote, the rural world seems to "no longer possess any redeeming features".

However, as in the development of the relationship between Mansaram and Kadambai, the plot registers an unexpected turn, bringing fresh hope to the unmitigated abjection. Expelled by his own family because of this liaison, Mansaram comes to the *bastī* to live with Kadambai. Inspired by a childhood friend, who claims

[1] Delacy, "Politics, Pleasure and Cultural Production", 130.

that "cultivating is not the only profession" (*khetībārī hī akelā dhaṁdhā nahīṁ*, 145), Mansaram mortgages his land and aquires a liquor license, paving the way for opening a *ṭhekā* in the community. The licenced liquor shop brings a change in the fortune of the Kabutaras, whose *bastī* now turns into a prosperous business hub:

> *Naī vyavasthā ke sāth kabūtarā-bastī kā calan badalne lagā. Corī ke lie jāne kī kis phursat? Mad ho to pīnevāloṁ kī kyā kami? … Thekā sajā ho to rāh calte log rukne lage … gāṁv ke āvārā aur nīcī kaum ke laṛkoṁ ne bīṛī-sigreṭoṁ kā khokhā sajā liyā … pān kī dukān sajāī jātī, usse pahale pūṁch bassṭaiṇḍ ke ḍhābevāle ne ṭheke par apne ḍhābe kī śākhā khol dī—phullan kā ḍhabā … nāī aur parcūnī kī dukān ke sāth bastī ābād hone lagī. Logoṁ meṁ tājgī ā gaī. Reḍiyo bajne lagā. Kabūtarā-bastī sāf-suthrī-sī dikhne lagī.* (173-74)
>
> With the new order, life in the kabutara basti changed. Who had the time now to go stealing? If liquor flowed, how could there be any dearth of customers? … When the theka was decked out, people on the road stopped to watch … The ne'er-do-wells and the low-caste boys of the village got together and set up a kiosk for beedis and cigarettes … Before the paan shop could be set up the dhabawala of the Poonch bus stand opened a branch of his eatery at the theka—Phulla ka dhaba … With a barber's shop and a grocer's shop the basti became populous. Vigour came to the people. Radios blared. Tha Kabutara basti began to look clean.

The *ṭhekā* therefore becomes the solution to the Kabutaras' wretched situation, not only making the *bastī* thrive, but also serving as a link between the community and mainstream society. I read this transformation first as a critique of cultivation, which, as the quote suggests, is incompatible with the present social-economic circumstances and unable to make a difference. In contrast, commercialisation becomes the optimal option for remedying the poverty in which the Kabutara community has been suffering for generations. Like other writers I examine in the thesis, Maitreyi Pushpa does not lose hope for the future of rural world, which still retains the potential to alleviate its problems, and therefore continues to be a livable space. In short, the village is not to be abandoned. Similar to commercialisation

which reshapes the living conditions of the Kabutaras, Alma's entry into the political arena can be understood as a sign of change of the corrupt local politics.

Conclusion

As one of the most eminent writers in contemporary Hindi literature, Maitreyi Pushpa is widely celebrated for her commitment to rural themes and portrayal of strong rural female subjects. In the family and community saga *Almā Kabūtarī*, Pushpa combines the narrative agenda of establishing a positive, alternative identity for the marginalised ex-criminal tribe with articulating her feminist politics. The thematic focus of this novel, the Kabutaras are a real ex-criminal tribe which still carries the criminal stigma and endures exploitation and humiliation, even though they were decriminalised long ago. The novel presents their unknown world to the readers who are unfamiliar with this marginalised community, and are, perhaps, dissociated from the village.

To provide an alternative image for the Kabutaras different from the mainstream narrative which simply labels them as criminals, the narrative shifts the narrative focus between the Kajjas and the Kabutaras. When the focalisation is aligned with the Kajjas, the Kabutaras are shown to be targets of exploitation and manipulation. The fact that the Kajjas treat the Kabutaras with sheer violence and brutality in order to maintain their dominance makes the reader question their "civility". In contrast, when the narrative perspective aligns with the Kabutaras, the reader comes to perceive a vigourous community full of dynamism and even internal disputes. Through the internal point of view, the delineation of the Kabutaras poses a strong challenge to mainstream criminal tribe rhetoric. The narrative even provides an alternative history of the community, linking their past to the noble Rajputs and

confirming their contributions to the 1857 revolt. I suggest that the narrative seeks to establish a unique and positive identity for the Kabutaras.

The representation of both female and male characters in *Almā Kabūtarī* embodies the writer's feminist politics. The three main female Kabutara characters, Bhuri, Kadambai and Alma, are all linked to Rani Padmini, their ancestor according to the alternative history, who followed her free will to survive instead of committing the notorious *jauhar*. Inspired by Padmini, the women in the community continue her struggle in the modern era, demonstrating strength and resilience in negotiating constraints. They maintain control of their bodies, stay true to their feminine desires, and show assertiveness to womanhood. Alma, the third generation in the community, manages to survive a series of terrible setbacks and finally becomes equipped with political power, an indication of her success in transforming her life. In comparison, the promising male Kabutara characters turn out to be weak, confused and crushed. I suggest that the characterisation of the successful female characters in comparison to the failed male characters seeks to demonstrate the writer's inclination towards women, who are expected to be capable agents to generate change.

The rural setting is also a significant actor in the novel. The writer employs real toponyms in the narrative not only to enhance authenticity, but also to associate the Kabutaras to this particular region, contributing to form a specific identity for them. The expansive chronotope of the novel includes a whole range and scale of spaces within the region, and the movement of the characters across them constitutes the main dynamic of the novel. As in the "road chronotope", the encounters caused by the movement of characters become crucial moments propelling the plot. Finally, instead of portraying a rural domain completely mired in abjection, violence and

exploitation, Maitreyi Pushpa remains positive about the future of village, which still retains hope to revive itself.

As I have stated in this chapter, the writer strives to make discursive room for the Kabutaras and ex-crimnial tribes while rejecting their subsumption under the overarching Dalit banner. Dalit-oriented writing has become a major trend in contemporary Hindi literature, and my next chapter explores the representations of rural Dalit subjects in today's Hindi prose narratives.

Chapter 2

The Era of Dalits Has Come (?): A comparative reading of *Chappar* and *Tarpaṇ*

Caste injustice has been a constitutive theme in Hindi village writing ever since Premchand's time, as we shall see. In more recent years, however, it has been accompanied by a concern with Dalit politicisation. This chapter compares two contemporary novels—*Chappar* (1994) by Jai Prakash Kardam and *Tarpaṇ* (2004) by Shivmurti—which deal with caste justice and Dalit politicisation in very different ways. Kardam's *Chappar* envisages a Dalit utopia in which a Dalit-led movement will end caste exploitation and bring about a fairer rural economy and society that will advantage all. Shivmurti's *Tarpaṇ* is a blow-by-blow account of the induction of rural Dalits into the "local state" and political maneuvering, in which they, but local Brahmins, too, have to fight for *izzat*, dignity. One of his Brahmin characters in *Tarpaṇ* ruse that "the rule of Dalits has come in this dark age" (p. 61). In fact, the struggle is wide open. But both novels deal with post-Dalit assertion.

My analysis will show that the writer's positionality—Kardam as a self-identifying Dalit and Shivmurti a non-Dalit—informs the perspective and hence results in different representations of Dalits in the village. In *Chappar*, Dalits are portrayed as a united group fighting for equality under the leadership of the protagonist Chandan, whereas *Tarpaṇ* does not refrain from pointing out conflicts among Dalits, providing a more realist account of their confrontation with the high-caste. To locate these two texts and appreciate both their novelties and the continuities with earlier treatments, we need to briefly review how Dalits have been represented in Hindi fiction.

The Dalit Question in Hindi literature

Starting with Marathi Dalit literature inspired by the Ambedkarite movement, Dalit literary writing has emerged as a powerful force in almost all major Indian languages and has become a tremendous self-expressive force addressing issues of Dalit oppression.[1] Inspired by Marathi Dalit writing, from 1980s onwards middle-class Dalit writers in Hindi have attempted to publish their works with major Hindi publishers or in mainstream Hindi magazines such as *Hans*, in order to gain a voice in the Hindi literary field and counter upper-caste domination in the Hindi literary sphere.[2] Since then, Hindi Dalit literature has gained momentum and has gradually become a notable literary trend. At the same time, Dalit writers and critics have brought increasing critical attention towards the representation of Dalits in Hindi fiction.

Before the emergence of the Hindi Dalit writing in the 1980s, the discrimination and exploitation of rural Dalits had already been addressed in Hindi fiction. Premchand, who advocated and practised the doctrine that literary production should be closely engaged with everyday life and reflect social concerns, was one of the first Hindi writers to portray rural low-caste and Dalit subjects.[3] In some of his short stories, such as *Sadgati* (*Deliverance*, 1932), *Ṭhākur kā Kuāṁ* (*Thakur's well*, 1932), *Dūdh kā Dām* (*The Price of Milk*, 1934) and *Kafan* (*The Shroud*, 1936), Premchand portrayed with great empathy the exploitation of Dalit

[1] For a comprehensive introduction to the origin and development of Dalit literature, See Eleanor Zelliot, 'Dalit Literature, Language, and Identity', in *Language in South Asia*, ed. Braj B. Kachru, Yamuna Kachru, and S. N. Sridhar (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 450–65.
[2] Sarah Beth Hunt, *Hindi Dalit Literature and the Politics of Representation* (Routledge India, 2014), 132–33.
[3] See Premchand, 'The Nature and Purpose of Literature', *Social Scientist* 39, no. 11/12 (2011): 82–86.

labourers and servants at the hands of their high-caste village masters, and pathos of rural Dalit life due to caste-based discrimination and economic deprivation.

However, the social realist mode of representation adopted by Premchand has come under attack when it comes to Dalit characters. Critic and author Geetanjali Pandey has pointed out that although Premchand's concern about rural Dalits "does not get vitiated by his own upper-caste bias", compared to his perspective and thoughtful journalistic writing, his fictional works reflect a strong Gandhian influence of intervention, which fails to discard traditional values and practices.[1] Yet, given the socio-cultural conditions and discourses of the time, Toral Gajarawala contends that it is still debatable whether Premchand could have taken a much more radical stance.[2]

It is Dalit critics who have expressed stronger criticism. Given Premchand's canonical status, the re-evaluation of his works under the framework of Dalit literary criticism has also been for Dalit writers and critics a way to denounce upper-caste morality and literary sensibilities and put forward their own revolutionary aesthetics. Inspired by the new Dalit critical framework, Dalit critics have criticised Premchand for, as Brueck puts it, "a lack of Dalit *cetnā* (consciousness)" in his works.[3] Renowned Dalit critic Sharankumar Limbale defines Dalit *cetnā* as "the revolutionary mentality connected with struggle".[4] The revolutionary element is critical to the concept. The author goes on to state that Dalit *cetnā* is

> a belief in rebellion against the caste system, recognising the human being as its focus. Ambedkarite thought is the inspiration for this consciousness. Dalit consciousness makes slaves conscious of their slavery. Dalit consciousness is an important seed for Dalit

[1] Geetanjali Pandey, *Between Two Worlds: An Intellectual Biography of Premchand* (Manohar, 1989), 122.
[2] See Gajarawala, *Untouchable Fictions Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste*, 38. Alok Rai also made similar criticism of Premchand, see Alok Rai, 'A Kind of Crisis: Godaan and the Last Writings of Munshi Premchand."', *Journal of the School of Languages* 2 (1974): 1–13.
[3] Brueck, *Writing Resistance*, 46.
[4] Sharankumar Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies, and Considerations*, trans. Alok Mukherjee (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2004), 32.

> literature. It is separate and distinct from the consciousness of other writers. Dalit literature is demarcated as unique because of this consciousness.[1]

Following Limbale's steps, Hindi Dalit writer and critic Omprakash Valmiki also provides a definition of the term Dalit consciousness, which, he believes, makes Dalit literature distinct from other genres:

> Dalit *cetnā* does not just make an account of or give a report on the anguish, misery, pain and exploitation of Dalits, or draw a tear-streaked and sensitive portrait of Dalit 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. That is Dalit cetnā. "Dalit" means deprived of human rights, those who have been denied them on a social level. Their *cetnā* is Dalit *cetnā*.[2]

In the short stories of Premchand listed above, all the rural Dalit characters are consistently portrayed as humble, fearful, pitiful, and sometimes even degraded and soulless. There is hardly any trace of the revolutionary consciousness in them, nor do they display any agency to bring about change. For instance, *Ṭhākur kā kuāṁ* (*Thakur's Well*) features a Dalit woman, Gangi, who tries to take some clean water for her ill and thirsty husband Jokhu from the Thakur's well because theirs has been polluted by a dead animal. In dreadful fright, well captured with sensitivity in the narrative, Gangi manages to get water from the well, but at that moment the Thakur's door opens all of a sudden.[3] Gangi then drops the container and runs back home only to find Jokhu drinking the rotten water. It is undoubtedly a tragic delineation of the unfairness and inhumanity of caste discrimination in the village and cannot help but arouse pity in the reader. However, Gangi is portrayed as an

[1] Limbale, 32.
[2] Omprakash Valmiki, *Dalit sāhity kā saundaryaśāstr* (Delhi: Radhakrishna Prakashan, 2001), 29. The translation is by Laura Brueck, see Laura Brueck, 'Dalit Chetna in Dalit Literary Criticism', *Seminar*, 2006, 558. It should be also notes that there exists an considerable overlap between Dalit writers and critics.
[3] Premchand, 'Ṭhākur Kā Kuāṁ', in *Grāmy Jīvan Kī Kahāniyāṁ* (Banaras: Sarasvati Press, 1948).

entirely timid character overwhelmed by fear, and Jokhu is helpless. None of them demonstrates any courage to confront the upper-castes. The end of the story, when Jokhu is seen drinking the polluted water, has been criticised by Ratankumar Sambhariya—if he had to drink the water eventually, what was the point for Gangi to risk getting pure water from the Thakur's well in the first place?[1]

Kafan (*The Shroud*), perhaps Premchand's best-known story, and his last, has also attracted severe criticism from Dalit critics.[2] It begins with two Chamars, Ghisu and his son Madhav, roasting potatoes without paying any attention to the cry of Budhiya, Madhav's wife, who is dying of childbirth inside the hut. The two men in fact exploit Budhiya's eventual death to extract money from other villagers in the name of her shroud. However, Ghisu and Madhav squander the money in drinks and snacks, and (ironically) bless Budhiya for her death which has made their feast possible. As for the shroud, they believe they will get money again from the villagers counting on their fear of serious religious consequences. Valmiki has criticised the story by suggesting that, apart from depicting the idleness and heartlessness of the two characters it does not raise any issue relevant to the problem of Chamars or Dalits despite the fact that they have a Dalit identity. Premchand, in his view, unfairly condemns Dalits by mistakenly conflating the Dalit problem with economically related causes.[3] Thus Valmiki claims that it "reinforces the Hindu bias and perspective and portrays the Dalit life in an unpleasant way."[4] Ajay Navaria, another eminent Hindi Dalit writer has also criticised Premchand, though employing what Laura Brueck has termed "important literary shift towards postrealism"[5], with

[1] Ratankumar Sambhariya, *Muṃśī Premcand Aur Dalit Samāj: Rāshṭrīya Bahas Ke Āīne Meṁ Vivecanā* (New Delhi: Anamika Publisher and Distributors, 2011), 163.
[2] Premchand, 'Kafan', in *Grāmy Jīvan Kī Kahāniyāṁ* (Banaras: Sarasvati Press, 1948).
[3] Omprakash Valmiki, 'Premchand: Sandarbh Dalit Vimarsh', *Tīsrā Pakṣ*, no. 14–15 (2004): 28. Cited from Brueck, *Writing Resistance*, 49.
[4] Omprakash Valmiki, 'Dalit Sahitya: Alochna Ka Sankat', *Ālocanā*, no. Oct-Dec (2012): 103.
[5] Laura Brueck, 'Bending Biography: The Creative Intrusions of "Real Lives" in Dalit Fiction', *Biography* 40, no. 1 (2017): 78.

some dark humour. Instead of finding fault with the stories mentioned previously through critical writing, Navaria has written a short story titled "*Uttarkathā*" (*After- or Countertale*), in which the various Dalit characters who feature in Premchand's stories appear with their original names woven together in a single tale but with characteristics at odds with the original stories.[1] The indifference, ignorance and moral degradation exhibited by the Dalit characters in Premchand's stories are replaced by enterprise, resistance and fraternity in Navaria's rewrite. No longer lying low and acting as objects of sympathy of the upper castes, the Dalit figures turn into agents equipped with the potential to choose their own lives instead of yielding to oppression or patronisation. This story contributes to a new phase in Hindi literature characterised by the power of Dalit writers to reshape the pattern of representing Dalit characters. Dalit figures meet completely different treatment in contemporary Hindi writing from that in Premchand's works, with Dalit autobiography being one such example.

In parallel with the idea of Dalit *cetnā* as a principle of critique, Dalit writers have also conceptualised *svānubhūti* (self-experience) in opposition to *sahānubhūti* (sympathy), to claim legitimacy and authority in representing Dalits.[2] One of the most effective ways to regain the control of representing themselves has been through the writing of Dalit autobiography—the non-fictional genre serves to justify the authenticity of the narrative as the writer is the subject of sufferings. Autobiography has the advantage of recounting the first-hand experience of brutality, violence and humiliation meted out to them by upper-caste Hindus. The

[1] "*Uttar kathā*" literally means "Sequel" or "Responding story". Laura Brueck translates the title as "Hello Premchand", possibly to highlight and reinforce the connection of this story to those by Premchand for English readers. See Ajay Navaria, *Unclaimed Terrain*, trans. Laura Brueck (New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2013).
[2] See Hunt, *Hindi Dalit Literature and the Politics of Representation*, 204.

experience is essential in the process of telling, to use the metaphor provided by Manager Pandey, "only ash knows the experience of burning".[1]

Given that most Dalit autobiographies begin in the village, they offer a first-person narrative gaze on rural Dalit life and culture. In Dalit autobiographies, the village is where the protagonists spend their childhood and experience the most dreadful caste discrimination. It is through the traumatic experiences in the village that the Dalit subjects first gain a clear understanding of caste identity and face humiliation, and the village thus plays a significant role in their transitional journey from victims of oppression to rebels. For instance, *Jūṭhan* (*Leftovers*, 1997), the now famous Hindi Dalit autobiography by the well-known Dalit writer and critic Omprakash Valmiki, was among the first ones introduced to the western world through translation.[2] It stretches over the period of more than 30 years from the 1950s, when the writer spent his childhood at the small Barla village in western Uttar Pradesh, until the 1980s when he obtained a manager position of an ordinance factory in Dehradun. To employ a chronotopic approach, the village for Valmiki consists of different spaces where the practices of untouchability take place, such as the segregated Dalit *bastī*, the well, and the school. The various afflictions that Valmiki and his family experienced in the village because of their Dalit identity permeate the first half of the text. He recounts, for example, an incident at a village school, a recurrent chronotopic motif as the primal space of caste discrimination, in which he was deprived of the right of study and asked to clean the whole campus by the headmaster precisely because of his caste:

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[1] This is quoted from an interview with Jai Prakash Kardam. See Jai Praksah Kardam, 'Only ash knows the experience of burning': An Interview with Dalit Writer Jai Prakash Kardam, interview by Nilanshu Kumar Agarwal, thanal online, September 2008, http://www.thanalonline.com/issues/09/Interview2_en.htm.

[2] Omprakash Valmiki, *Jūṭhan* (Radhakrishna Prakashan, 1999); Valmiki, *Joothan*. For an investigation of how translation informs Dalit autobiographical narratives, see Neelam Srivastava, 'A Multiple Addressivity: Indian Subaltern Autobiographies and the Role of Translation', in *Indian Literature and the World* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2017), 105–34.

> Obeying the headmaster's orders, I cleaned all the rooms and the verandas. Just as I was about to finish, he came to me and said, "After you have swept the rooms, go and sweep the playground."
>
> The playground was much larger than my small physique could handle, and in cleaning it my back began to ache. My face was covered with dust. I had dust inside my mouth. The other children in my class were studying and I was sweeping. The headmaster was sitting in his room and watching me. I was not even allowed to get a drink of water. I swept the whole day. I had never done so much work, being the pampered one among my brothers.[1]

This episode shows how, as Hunt puts, the "narrative of pain" forms the defining element of Dalit autobiographical narratives.[2]

The title of the autobiography, *Jūṭhan*, literarily meaning "leftover", encapsulates equivocal connotations, which, refers to the leftovers they get as payment after a whole day of hard work, and also implies metaphorically that the writer and his people are just like the leftovers of the society. In her evaluation of Valmiki's text, Sarah Hunt points out that his representation of village shatters the dominant literary portrayal of the Indian village as a "romanticised place of simple beauty".[3] However, there seems to be no idealised imagination of Indian village in contemporary Hindi literary writing. Instead, my reading suggests that the village tends to be mostly portrayed as a deeply problematic, if not dystopian, space. In fact, against this background, the positive resolution in Dalit writer Jai Prakash Kardam's *Chappar* is so unusual as to invite closer attention.

More generally, how are Dalits portrayed in Hindi village writing within the changing socio-economic context of the contemporary Indian village? As we have

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[1] Valmiki, *Joothan*, 5.
[2] "Pain is used in the Dalit autobiographical narrative firstly as evidence that caste discrimination continues to be prevalent in Indian society. Dalit autobiographies reconstruct the notion of pain as unnatural and the caste discrimination associated with such pain as something wholly un-modern by mobilising "modern" discourses of justice and human rights and depicting the nation as the guardian of the rights of its citizens. Hindi Dalit autobiographies also use the experience of pain as an opportunity to expose the underlying power structure and historical basis of caste discrimination, calling upon its readers to witness the protagonist's pain"; Hunt, *Hindi Dalit Literature and the Politics of Representation*, 184.
[3] Hunt, 187.

already seen, the representation has registered a dramatic change from Premchand to contemporary self-identifying Dalit texts. In an era when Dalit literature has itself become mainstream, is it possible to identify an alternative pattern of representation, a reversal of the chronotope? In the next two sections, through a close reading of *Chappar* and *Tarpaṇ*, I turn to the image of Dalits and the wider politics of representing rural Dalit subjects in the post-liberalisation era.

Chappar: A Utopian Vision of a Dalit Era

Jai Prakash Kardam and *Chappar*

The author of the novel *Chappar* (*The Thatched Roof*, 1994), Jai Prakash Kardam (b. 1958), is among the most active self-identifying Dalit writers in the contemporary Hindi literary arena. Sharing a similar life trajectory with many other Dalit writers, Kardam was born at Indergarhi, a small village near Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh, and now part of Delhi NCR. Unlike Omprakash Valmiki, who spent his childhood in abject poverty, however, Kardam did not grow up in conditions of extreme deprivation.[1] His relatively more comfortable financial situation however did not protect them from being ill-treated. In a dispute with regard to irrigation, for instance, Kardam's father was beaten with a lathi by the higher-caste Jat people of the village, which led to permanent waist damage. Inspired by this incident, the writer published a famous short story titled *Lāṭhī* (*The Stick*) in the special Dalit issue of *Hans*.[2] Kardam had to shoulder the economic burden of the family from a very young age given the deteriorating health status of his father. When recalling the struggle to survive after the death of his father, Kardam said in an interview:

[1] His family owned land when he was born, see Shilbodhi, *Dalit Sāhitya Kī Vaicārikī Aur Dr. Jayaprakāś Kardam* (Delhi: Academic Pratibha, 2007), 13.
[2] Shilbodhi, 13–14. For an interpretation of the story, See Brueck, *Writing Resistance*, 92–98.

> My family was very poor. We were living hand to mouth. My father was a labourer. He was a tonga driver. After the death of my father, I also sometimes did this work. I used to work as a labourer for five rupees a day in house construction, road construction and factories.[1]

Despite great adversity, he insisted on pursuing his studies and education did provide him with the possibility to represent his Dalit community and fight for their rights. He is a holder of one doctorate and three master's degrees. His firm recognition of the significance of education is also manifest in the *Chappar*. Education definitely played an important role in Kardam's career and helped change his life, as he was appointed at the Indian High Commission to Mauritius to promote Indian languages and cultures in the late 2000s.

Kardam's intervention in Dalit discourse is all-around. Like many other Dalit writers, he straddles both Dalit literary production and criticism. He has produced in various genres, including novel, short story and poetry.[2] But compared to other Dalit writers, such as Omprakash Valmiki and Ajay Navaria, Kardam is not a prolific writer who publishes extensively in the Hindi mainstream platforms. Rather, he publishes in Dalit journals, focuses on developing Dalit critical theories and makes space for Dalit discourse. This entrenches his position in the Hindi Dalit literary domain. Kardam remains a central figure in the network of Delhi-based Hindi Dalit writers, which, as Hunt's investigation shows, has a powerful influence on shaping the Hindi Dalit literary discourse.[3] He serves as the editor of one of the most important Dalit literary magazines, *Dalit Sāhitya*, which provides Dalit writers with their own platform to express Dalit perspectives and frees them from the

[1] Hunt, *Hindi Dalit Literature and the Politics of Representation*, 137.
[2] Kardam began to publish his works from mid 1980s. He has already published two novels *Karuṇā* (1986) and *Chappar* (1994), one short story collection *Talāś* (2005), two poetry collections *Gūṁgā nahīṁ thā maiṁ* (1997) and *Tinakā tinakā āg* (2004) and several forms of children's literature.
[3] Hunt, *Hindi Dalit Literature and the Politics of Representation*, 141. Hunt also illustrates in her work how those Delhi-based Dalit writers formed an "inner circle" of Hindi Dalit discourse and the dynamics between those who are included and excluded from of it. See Hunt, 140–46.

discrimination or pressure that they may encounter when trying to publishing their works in other magazines. Kardam explains the significance of establishing this magazine:

> We (Dalit writers) don't have any platform. We have to talk on other people's platforms. And when we talk on their platforms, we only get five minutes to say what we have to say. We don't have sufficient time or opportunity to express ourselves. So we felt we must have our own platform where we can speak about our own matters unhindered.[1]

The editorship of such an essential magazine, Hunt argues, testifies Kardam's "cultural authority" in the field of Hindi Dalit literature.[2]

Chappar was Kardam's second novel. While relatively short at 115 pages, it holds a special position in the repertoire of Hindi Dalit literary world as arguably the first Hindi Dalit novel written by a self-identifying Dalit writer.[3] Moreover, if we consider its relatively early date, 1994, when Dalit writing was gaining momentum in the Hindi mainstream literary arena, it is easy to imagine the importance of the book and its long-lasting impact on Hindi Dalit discourse.[4] In this section I offer a close reading of *Chappar*, highlighting once again on issues of representation. In particular, I focus on the role that focalisation plays in the novel: both rural and urban domains are described from the perspective of Chandan, the Dalit protagonist. I discuss the position of this character in relation to the Dalit community, which he represents to us readers. Although Chandan is himself a Dalit, he somehow takes an outsider's gaze and observes the suffering of his fellow Dalits instead of experiencing the pain himself. This detachment, I argue, enables him to act as a

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[1] Hunt, *Hindi Dalit Literature and the Politics of Representation*, 151–52.
[2] Hunt, 164.
[3] This claim is highlighted on the inner cover of the book as "*Chappar* is the first Hindi Dalit novel". But Devendra Chaubey disputes that *Chappar* is preceded by two earlier novels, *bandhan mukt* by Ramji Lal Sahayak published in 1954 and *Amar jyoti* by D.P. Varun of 1980. See Devendra Chaubey, *Ādhunik Sāhitya meṁ Dalit-vimarś* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2009), 170.
[4] Shilbodhi also argues that by 1994 there has been "no meaningful novel" by Hindi Dalit writers coming out. See Shilbodhi, *Dalit Sāhitya Kī Vaicārikī Aur Dr. Jayaprakāś Kardam*, 72.

reformer. By examining the role of Dalit ideology and consciousness in the Dalit movement, I argue that the novel puts special emphasis on a pro-Dalit political agenda, which materialises through a utopian vision in which the caste identities cease to matter. The novel thus sees its function as a blueprint for the Dalit movement.

Chappar follows the narrative pattern of Premchand's rural epic, *Godān*, in which the narrative gaze shifts back and forth between the village and the city. In the village, the narrative shows the Dalit couple Sukkha and Ramiya struggling in extreme deprivation and negotiating the oppression exercised by village Thakurs and Brahmins. When it comes to the urban realm, the narrative focalises on the protagonist Chandan, the son of Sukkha and Ramiya, and shows how he accommodates himself to urban life, interacts with urban Dalits, and eventually becomes a leader of the Dalit movement. Before I focus my analysis, let me provide a brief introduction to the plot and characters.

The story unfolds itself in the fictional village of Matapur in western Uttar Pradesh on the bank of the River Ganges. The Dalit couple Sukkha and Ramiya live in penury under a thatched roof. Their son Chandan is pursuing his studies in the city of Santnagar, to which the narrative gaze soon shifts. In the urban Dalit *bastī*, Chandan meets the hospitable Hariya, a Dalit street vendor who invites Chandan to live with him and treats him as his own son. A very close relationship develops between them. The painful experience of the Dalit subject is not as highlighted in *Chappar* as in other Dalit texts, such as *Jūṭhan*. Although the protagonist carries the identity of a rural Dalit, it is in the city that Chandan enters the narrative for the first time, with no account of his transition from the rural background.

Chandan encounters the Dalit stigma and experiences alienation at college. The narrator does not provide any details other than briefly mentioning that the

people around tend to neglect or avoid him. As his study continues, Chandan realises the importance of ameliorating the condition of the Dalit community and is determined to engage with his people, giving them voice using his knowledge and capability. He manages to persuade his Dalit friends to harness their individual aspiration to the future of the community. He also establishes a school to provide free education for Dalit children. Gradually Chandan builds up his prestige among Dalits, and his initiative to uplift the community transforms into a massive movement under his leadership which successfully turns the city into an egalitarian domain.

Meanwhile in Matapur life for the Dalit couple is full of twists and turns. The fact that Chandan is the first to study in the city even before any upper-caste youngsters shocks the entire village. For the upper-caste, it feels like "one Chamar has peed on everyone's head" (31). They intimidate Sukkha and order him to recall Chandan. When Sukkha refuses, the couple are forced to leave the village. However, Thakur Harnam's daughter Rajini, who has maintained a good relationship with Chandan and his family since childhood, confronts her father for his unfair treatment of the Dalit couple. In contrast to the casteist mindset of the other village upper castes, who do not hesitate to oppress Dalits for their own interests, Rajini assumes an attitude of solidarity and provides support to Sukkha's family. At the same time, the Dalit movement inaugurated by Chandan brings change to Matapur. Dalits' non-cooperation destabilises upper-caste domination and puts an end to the troubles of the Dalit couple, who then move back to the village. The novel ends with a reconciliation between Sukkha and Thakur Harnam, a symbol of the new normalisation of relationship between Dalits and the upper-caste.

Since the novel's central character Chandan shares the perspective of the narrator, in the next section I focus on the narrative function of the narrator and protagonist and their positionality.

The Position of the Narrator and Protagonist

Unlike other Dalit texts which tend to highlight the humiliation and exploitation experienced by the Dalit characters, *Chappar* takes a different approach. Although the protagonist is a Dalit himself, the narrative reveals that he actually perceives his fellow Dalits as if he is not one of them. While Chandan is the single focaliser who often shares the point of view with the third-person narrator, as I will demonstrate, the two should not be conflated, and more importantly, they do not achieve what Toral Gajjarwala has called the "dismantling of ethnographic gaze" in Dalit narratives. The dissociation of Chandan from the Dalit community, I suggest, raises questions about him and the narrator as an "authentic Dalit subject", as Richard Delacy claims. The point here, I argue, is that his status as a *de facto* outsider enables the protagonist to understand the problems of the community and turns him into a reformer.

The theme of caste is foregrounded from the beginning of the narrative. Once again, the novel opens by describing the geographical layout of Matapur village, located along the Ganges but divided into two sections—the upper-caste live on the upper bank whereas the Dalits far below. This spatial separation serves as a symbol of social disparity. Sukkha's family lives at the farthest end of the village, implying their extremely underprivileged position. Their thatched roof (echoed in the title, "*chappar*") reveals their financial deprivation. The opening here suggests that low-caste status not only separates the family from the rest of the village due to the restrictions on touchability, but also is strongly associated their poverty. Unlike

Omprakash Valmiki's accusation against Premchand of conflating untouchability and poverty, *Chappar*'s narrator does treat them altogether, indicating that lower-caste status is strongly linked to economic disadvantage. That is to say, the narrator regards caste as the overarching issue that contains other related problems.

In the second chapter, in which the narrative gaze shifts from the village to the city and the protagonist Chandan is introduced, we get his imagination of the city before he actually sees it:

> *Candan jab paṛhne ke lie gāṁv se śahar āyā to uske man meṁ ek kalpnā thī śaharoṁ ko lekar. Vah soctā thā kī śahar kā jīvan gāṁv ke gaṁdepan se bhinn hogā ekdam sāf-suthrā. Na vahāṁ gāṁvoṁ kī tarah ārthik taṁgī hogī, na roṭī aur kapaṛe kī samasyā. Na pulis aur kānūn kā ātaṁk hogā, na ṭhākur-jamīṁdāroṁ kī hiṁsā aur ātaṁk kā manmānā rāj. Na seṭh-sāhūkāroṁ ke sūd kī nirmam mār hogī, na ūṁc-nīc aur chuā-chūt kā jahar aur na corī, ḍakaitī yā kisī any tarah kī asurakṣā hī.* (10)
>
> When Chandan came to the city from the village for study, he had an image of the city in his mind. He thought that life in the city would be completely clean, different from the dirtiness of the village. There would be neither terror from the police or rules as in the village, nor violence from the landlords or their horrific arbitrary rule. No cruel blow from the moneylenders. No poisonous untouchability or difference between high and low. There would be no theft, robbery or other forms of insecurity.[1]

This account, which envisages the city as a utopian space where life is easy and comfortable, contrasts sharply with the opening, in which the village is an abject space for Dalits due to spatial segregation and poverty. However, the encounter with the city turns out to be entirely opposite to the account above—as per the following quote, the city presents itself largely as a replica of the village, where Dalits still have to struggle to survive. The high expectation towards urban life collides with the harsh reality unfolding before Chandan, as the narrative goes on to present some snapshots of urban Dalits:

[1] The translations of the original Hindi texts in this chapter are mine, unless specified.

> *Śahar meṁ bhī bahut se dalit aur daridr log bina chukī-bhunī sabjī khāte haiṁ yā keval pānī yā cāy ke sāth namak kī roṭiyāṁ gale se nice utārkar jindā rahte haiṁ…Yahāṁ bhī tan ḍhakne ko kapṛā nahiṁ hai bahut logoṁ ke pās. Yahāṁ bhī gāṁvoṁ kī tarah bacce ret-miṭṭī meṁ khelte naṅge ghūmte haiṁ. Bahut sī auratoṁ ke pās yahāṁ bhī mailī-kucailī sī sirf ek sāṛī hotī hai…dūsarī sāṛī ke abhāv meṁ bahut sī auratem nahā-dho nahiṁ pātīṁ—mahīnoṁ tak. Itnā hī nahiṁ, bahut sī garbhvatī auratoṁ ko phuṭpāth par hī khule ākāś ke nīce bacce paidā karne paṛte haiṁ.* (10-11)
>
> In the city many Dalits and poor people only eat raw vegetables, or they just gobble salty rotis with water and chai. Many people do not even have enough clothes to cover their bodies. Children play in mud and dirt just like in the village. Most women have only one simple shabby sari and because they don't have a second one, they cannot shower for months. Many pregnant women even deliver their babies on the footpath in broad daylight.

This contention deserves full attention as it is distinct from other Dalit imaginaries in which the city appears a more favourable place for Dalits. The village is usually the starting point in Dalit narratives, where Dalit subjects first experience the most severe caste discrimination, as I have already discussed in the previous section. It plays a crucial role for Dalits in that it is there that they become fully aware of their subordination and of the need to leave the village in order to escape it. When they leave the village for the city, life usually gets better—the urban domain provides Dalits with a shelter to hide their stigmatised identity and lead a normal life, as we shall see in Omprakash Valmiki's short story *Śavyātrā* in Chapter 4.

More importantly, these snapshots leave the impression that Chandan is seeing the urban Dalits from an outsider's point of view. What is notable here is the detachment—there is a clear intention to expose and discover the urban Dalits. This external perspective distances Chandan from the people he is representing and thus creates a tension between his own Dalit identity and the way in which he sees other Dalits, as if he is not one of them. As the plot moves forward, the feeling that Chandan is an outsider detached from the urban Dalit community becomes obvious. Commenting on their lives, Chandan recognises the "good aspects", such as the

absence of "commercial behaviour or treachery of middle class", but also points out their problems:

> *Jhopaṛ-paṭṭī meṁ rahne vāle in logoṁ meṁ na to madhyavarg kī bhāṁti āpā-dhāpī hai, na vyavasāyik vyavahār aur na chal-kapaṭ hī. Rasiktā inmeṁ keval gīt saṁgīt tak simit hai. Balki yūṁ kah sakte haiṁ kī jīvan kī mukhya dhārā se alag-thalag se paṛe in logoṁ ke jīvan meṁ na ras hai, na prāṇ. Aur jaise bahatī nadiyāṁ mahāsamudr meṁ jā milatī haiṁ vaise hī inkī jīvan yātrā bhī kahīṁ mahāśūnya meṁ jākar pūrī ho jātī hai. Samāj meṁ kyā ho rahā hai, deś kyā karavaṭ le rahā hai, iskī na inheṁ koī jānkārī hotī hai na in sab meṁ rūci hī.* (12)
>
> No ebb and flow of middle class or commercial behaviour or treachery can be seen in the people living in the slums. Their recreation is limited to music. It can also be said that they are diverted from the mainstream of life. Their life is devoid of flavour and spirit. Yes, they just follow the flow of life in some way. Just like running rivers flow into the sea, their trajectory of life will also end in the universe. What is happening in the society? Which direction the nation is turning to? Neither do they have any information, nor are they interested.

The quote points out lack of Dalit *cetnā* in these people, who do not aspire any improvement in their lives. There is an identifiable transition in Chandan's attitude towards the Dalit community from the last quote to this one, from simply observing to examining and critiquing their problems. Although Chandan comes from a Dalit background himself, he does not actually share any traits with the people he represents, with regard to both lifestyle and ideology. The distance from the urban Dalits eventually transforms into a strong sense of alienation for Chandan. Severely bothered by some acts of his own people, including bickering and brawls, beating wives and children and making terrible noises, Chandan complains, "*maiṁ ṭhahrā bāhar kā ādmī, apnā samay kāṭnā hai*" (I remain an outsider, biding my time, 13).

In her monograph on Dalit literature, Toral Gajarawala argues that

> Dalit literature is of course necessarily weighted towards the representation of certain castes. But this has also required a

> dismantling of the ethnographic gaze, and its reign of romantic "objectivity".[1]

Gajarawala takes *Chappar* as a case study to support the argument of "weighting towards the representation of certain castes".[2] Further, in support of her argument about the "dismantling of ethnographic gaze", she quotes an observation by Chandan of the "only recreation" of the people—music.

> *Rāg-rāganiyāṁ gāne kā bhī in lok-gāyakoṁ kā apanā alag andāj hotā hai. Jab bhī koī gāyak pūrī lay aur tāl ke sāth gātā hai to uskā ek hāth kān par aur dūsarā lok ko saṁdeś den kī sī mudrā meṁ ūpar uṭh jātā hai. Jaise-jaise gīt gati pakaṛatā hai vaise-vaise gāyak kī āvāj ojapūrṇ hotī calī jātī hai. aur gati kī lay ke sāth-sāth kabhī usakā hāth ūpar uṭhatā hai aur kabhī sir aur sīnā tan jātā hai. Us samay lagatā hai kī unakī ūṁcāiyoṁ ke āge parvatoṁ ke uttuṁg śikhar bhī jaise bahut choṭe aur gauṇ ho gae haiṁ. Oj meṁ bharakar jaise-jaise svar ūṁcā hotā jātā hai gāyak ke hāth aur sir bhī ūṁce uṭhate cale jāte haiṁ. Aur jaise-jaise gīt ḍhalān par ātā hai yā usakī gati mand paṛatī hai, hāth aur sir bhī nice kī or jhukane lagate haiṁ. Gāte-gāte kaī bār gāyak nṛtya kī sī mudrā meṁ ā jātā hai. Gīt kī lay ke sāth usakā śarīr bhī jhūm-jhūm jātā hai, kamar muṛakar duharī ho jātī hai aur māthā jamīn ko cūmane lagatā hai.* (11-12)
>
> Even when these people sang raag-raaginis, they had their own distinct style. When a singer sang with complete passion and rhythm, he did so with one hand on his ear, and the other gesturing to the people. As he picked up the speed of the song, his style became more effusive. And with the rhythm of the song, his hand would rise above his head, or fall to his chest. In those moments he seemed as small as one who had scaled the lofty peaks of mountains. As his voice rose with fervour, his hands and head too rose; as the song came down its slope and its rhythm became more faint, his hands and head would bow down. And sometimes while singing, he would make dancing gestures—his entire body moved with the rhythm of the song, bent double, his forehead kissing the ground.[3]

[1] Gajarawala, *Untouchable Fictions Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste*, 120.
[2] She goes on to mention that "the narrator of the novel is a young Dalit student living on the outskirts of an urban centre". See Gajarawala, 120. The young Dalit student here refers to Chandan, the protagonist of the novel. However, Gajarawala mistakenly conflates the narrator with the protagonist, although it is true that the narrator shares the same perspective of Chandan's when he is the focaliser.
[3] The translation is by Gajarawala. See Gajarawala, 122.

Gajarawala argues that the in this quote, the attention towards the moves and gestures of the singer demonstrates an interest that is distinct from regionalist writing, which is an "ethnographic project of recovery".[1] Here, instead, the "dismantling of ethnographic gaze" lies in the fact that there is no "content" of the song, only its "affect and the transient world of bodily gesture".[2] In response to Gajarawala's arguments, Richard Delacy argues that

> Chappar is important among early works of Dalit novel fiction in Hindi precisely because of the centrality of the Dalit subject as capable of producing an "ethnographic gaze" in a manner that is similar to early writings by non-Dalit writers such as Premchand. The political importance of this novel may actually be said to lie in the very existence of the authentic Dalit subject as narrator, and his perspective as a corrective to that of earlier high-caste writers.[3]

My reading differs from both Gajarawala's and Delacy's. The focus on "transient world of bodily gestures" does not necessarily lead to the deconstruction of ethnographic gaze. Nor is the fact that the scene is observed by an "authentic Dalit subject" diminishes its distance and objectification. As I have shown, Chandan belongs to the Dalit community but his stance towards Dalits in the urban *bastī* is not one of intimacy or identification. From observing their lives to actually feeling alienated, Chandan is always placed as a *de facto* outsider who observes and critiques. This detachment inevitably confers "ethnographic gaze" to the protagonist as well as to the narrator, for the narrator only takes on the ethnographic gaze when focalised on Chandan.

Detachment also relates to the issue of the "authentic Dalit subject", i.e. to the positionality of representation: how can Chandan (or the narrator) be an authentic

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[1] Gajarawala, 122.
[2] Gajarawala, 122. It should be noted that the narrator does briefly mention the content of the song just a few lines below the original quote: "*Unke gītoṁ aur rāgniyoṁ ke nāyak yā to vīr puruṣ hote hai yā rasik premī*" (The protagonists of their songs and *raagnis* are courageous heroes or sentimental lovers, 12).
[3] Delacy, 'Politics, Pleasure and Cultural Production', 174.

Dalit subject but at the same time detached from these other Dalits? The position of Chandan and the narrator points to a dilemma about Hindi Dalit writing, where Dalit writers have to face the criticism of their legitimacy to represent the underprivileged Dalit community, when they no longer share the same socio-economic conditions.[1] This also evokes the power dynamics between a representative who speaks for a marginalised group, and the group itself.[2] In *Chappar*, we may ask whether Chandan continues to be a true Dalit when he begins to speak for his community?

In the next section, I will show that the protagonist is more than just an outsider serving the purpose of providing ethnographic observation, but he is the essential agent to generate change for the entire Dalit community.

Articulating Dalit Consciousness

While other Dalit texts tend to take a realist approach and depict the humiliation and sufferings of Dalit subjects, this does not apply to *Chappar*. The novel conforms to a centralised narrative paradigm revolving around the protagonist, an Ambedkar-like character who initiates and leads the Dalit movement as the plot moves forward. With Chandan as the agent and catalyst, I argue that the narrative seeks to articulate Dalit consciousness as the key to rectify social problems. Dalit-oriented propositions that serve as instructions on how to conduct social reform are more often than not expressed in the most direct form, evoking political indoctrination. It is this Dalit political agenda for the establishment of a utopian society based on the principle of equality that lies at the core of the novel.

The political agenda begins to manifest very early in the third chapter, a diversion from the main plotline as Chandan meets with the hospitable Dalit Hariya,

[1] See Hunt, *Hindi Dalit Literature and the Politics of Representation*, 18.
[2] Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'

whose kindness changes the way the Chandan perceives urban people as being selfish and utilitarian.[1] This chapter turns the narrative into a new direction—a debate on superstitious beliefs between Chandan and other Dalits, who are raising money for a rain-seeking prayer. Chandan explains to them that the timing of rain, a result of delayed monsoon, has nothing to do with any supernatural force, and displays rational and atheist conviction. He persuades the Dalits to abandon such ignorant beliefs and goes on to assert that it is blind obedience to god that makes them suffer:

> *To iskā matlab yah huā kī tumhārī jo āj dīn-hīn hālata hai, tum jo rojī-roṭī ke lie dūsaroṁ ke muṁhatāj ho aur tumako nīce, achūt yā hey mān-kar dusare log tumase jis prakār ghṛṇā aur upekṣā kā vyavahār karate haiṁ, tum jo śoṣaṇ apamān aur atyācār ke śikār ho is sabakā kāraṇ īśvar hai, vahī tumhārī yah durdaśā kar rahā hai…Tum log jis īśvar ko mānte ho, uskī pūjā-arjanā karte ho, usko prasann rakhne ke lie bheṁṭ caṛhāte ho use tum par tanik bhī dayā nahīṁ ātī hai aur vah tumako paśuvat aur nārakīy jīvan jīne ko bādhya karatā hai.* (13)
>
> That is to say, your present low status, enslaved by others just for one daily meal, regarded as inferior, untouchable and marginalised, and on top of these the way in which you are treated with hatred and disregard and are the victims of oppression, insult and violence—all of these are thanks to god. It is god who puts you in this predicament … The god you believe in, pray to and even give oblation to so as to please him, he shows no mercy towards you, and it is he who makes you live like animals in these hellish conditions.

This radical and secular statement, positing that religion essentially is a shackle which all Dalits should throw off, should be read as a manifestation of Dalit *cetnā*. Ending predictably with Chandan's success in convincing his fellow Dalits, this chapter, I suggest, discloses the protagonist's reformist ideology and paves the way for him to become a Dalit leader and reformer. The actual distance Chandan keeps from the Dalit community—as I have shown in the previous section—facilitates the

[1] The reader may get confused here because there is an obvious narratological contradiction to the previous narrative of Chandan's idealisation of the city.

natural transformation of the character from an observer who documents and critiques to a reforming agent that generates substantial change in the society.

Instead of focusing on the making and development of the Dalit movement, the narrative clearly lays more stress on the Dalit political ideology that it intends to convey, and the goal that the movement is expected to achieve. Unlike other Dalit texts in which Dalit *cetnā* is embodied through realistic depictions of the painful experiences of marginalisation and exploitation and the Dalits' struggle to overcome the difficulties, *Chappar*, I suggest, elucidates Dalit consciousness through a direct and explicit articulation of its political aspiration. In Chapter 7, for instance, Chandan encourages his Dalit schoolmates in an educative speech to embrace collectivism, by which he means that they should tie their personal aspirations to their own community:

> *Hamārī śikṣā kī sārthaktā aur hamāre jīvan kā śrey is bāt meṁ hai ki hameṁ apne sāth-sāth apne samaj ke utthān aur vikās kī or bhī dhyān denā cāhie … Khālī peṭ, naṅge tan aur ṭūṭe-phūṭe chān-jhoṁpaṛoṁ meṁ basar karne kī vivaśtā, yahī rahā hai saikaṛoṁ-hajāroṁ varṣ se hamāre samāj kā yathārth. Ham log paṛh-likh gae haiṁ lekin hamārā samāj, hamāre nāte-riśtedār sabke sab abhī bhī usī sthiti meṁ haiṁ, un sabkī nigāheṁ hahārī or haiṁ. yadi unke utthān ke or ham hī dhyān nahiṁ deṁge to kaun degā.* (38-39)
>
> The meaning of our education and life lies in that we should focus as much on self-development as on the advancement of our society … Empty stomach, naked body and living in shabby houses, they have been our reality for hundreds of thousands of years. We are educated but our society, our people are still in that situation. They count on us. If we do not care about their development, then who will?

As a Dalit text aiming to convey Dalit ideology, a straightforward appeal as in this quote, I argue, is a natural choice for the narrator. Appeals as such also appear in other places to further reinforce the political core of the narrative. Apart from

consolidating the community, a fighting spirit is another key element of Dalit politics:

> *Hameṁ samāj se ṭakkar lenī hai, sattā se laṛāī laṛanī hai, Julm aur śoṣaṇ ke viruddh saṁgharṣa karnā hai. Ek do ādmī ke bas kā nahīṁ hai yah kām. Akelā canā bhāṛ nahīṁ phoṛ sakatā. Is sabke lie phauj cāhie, Vah phauj taiyār karūṁgā maiṁ.* (40)
>
> We have to knock against the society, fight with the established power and struggle against oppression and exploitation. This cannot be accomplished by one or two people. One swallow cannot make a summer. An army is required for this, and I will build that army.

The protagonist's mission to build an army, as the quote says, is achieved through education. The school run by Chandan to educate his fellow Dalits later becomes a centre for social discussion among enlightened Dalits, and finally education leads to a large-scale Dalit movement. Overturning the role of school in most Dalit texts as a space attached to unpleasant experiences of discrimination, as we saw in *Almā Kabūtarī* and *Jūṭhan*, *Chappar* instead firmly asserts that the school can play a key role in realising Dalit *cetnā*, which is necessary to generate ultimate social change.

Again, the novel does not take the realist approach commonly seen in Dalit texts and does not allocate significant narrative space to the depiction of the expectably difficult process of building the movement. Glossing over any possible obstacles, the narrative only presents to the reader the final achievement of the campaign. In chapter 14 out of 18, the narrative projects a rectified society—a utopia based on equality for all—in which caste is no longer a relevant label for any person:

> *Janm ke ādhār par vyakti ko śreṣṭh yā hīn mānne kī bhāvnā kā lop hone lagā aur uske sthān par yah bhāvnā viksit ho calī thī ki janm ke ādhār par nahiṁ apitu apne guṇ-karm tathā yogyatā ke ādhār par hī manuṣya śreṣṭh athvā hīn hotā hai … Is cetnā ke jāgrat hote hī samāj meṁ mithyā-viśvās aur āḍambaroṁ kā virodh śurū huā tathā āsthā aur anuṣṭhānoṁ ko aucitya-anaucitya kī kasauṭī par parakhā jāne lagā. Manuṣya ke janm se lekar mṛtyu tak hone vale dhārmik aur sāmājik anuṣṭhānoṁ ke sahāre phalne-phūlne vale*

> *paṇḍe-purohitoṁ ke paramparāgat vyavsāy ko bhī jabardast jhaṭkā lagā.* (85)
>
> Rather than telling a person's high or low position from his birth, the sentiment was replaced by judging a person on the basis of their character and ability … Together with such awareness, the opposition against blind faith and ostentation began in society. The justification for rituals was also examined. The flourishing business of pandits and purohits based on dealing with rituals of birth and death was also terminated.

When the narrative focus shifts back to the village, the reader is introduced to the story of Sukkha and his wife. While Chandan has achieved success effortlessly in the city, the Dalit couple are given a tough time in the village. The intimidation that Sukkha has to face because Chandan is the first student to study in the city is also the first inter-caste encounter that takes place in the narrative. Here, the narrator demonstrates a clear preference for Sukkha, through the contrast between the depiction of the upper-caste character Kane ("One-eyed") Pandit and of Sukkha's reaction. A lengthy description of the Brahmin leaves a negative impression of the character upon the reader:

> *Sabse pahale kāṇe paṇḍit se mukāblā huā sukkhā kā. Kāṇe paṇḍit kā aslī nām śrīrām śarmā thā. Par bacpan meṁ hī cecak meṁ ek āṁkh calī gaī thī tab se use kāṇārām kahā jāne lagā. Paṇḍit purohitāī kā puśtainī dhaṁdhā thā islie dhārmik anuṣṭhānoṁ ke nām par jo kuch kiyā-karāyā jātā hai, kāṇārām ne bhī vah sab sīkh liyā thā. Thoṛe se saṁskrt ke ślok bhī kaṁṭhasth kar lie the usne. Pitā kī mrtyu ke paścāt usne bhī ājīvikā ke lie yahī paitrak dhaṁdhā cunā. Is ke sivāy aur kar bhī kyā sakatā thā vah. Paṛhā-likhā itanā thā nahīṁ kī kahīṁ naukrī pā jātā ... kisī aur mulk thā gair jātī meṁ paidā huā hotā to bhūkhā martā kāṇārām ... logoṁ ko bevukūph banākar apnī ājīvikā maje se calāī jā saktī hai.* (31)
>
> Sukkha first met Kane Pandit. The real name of Kane Pandit was Shriram Sharma. But one eye was gone due to smallpox in his childhood and after that he was called "one-eyed Ram". Priesthood is Pandit's inherited job. Therefore, Kanaram had learned everything that Pandits do in the name of religious rituals. He had also memorised a few Sanskrit verses. After his father died, he chose this hereditary job as livelihood. What else could he do apart from this? He did not have enough education to get a job somewhere … Had he been born in another country or as a non-

> Brahmin, Kanaram would have starved to death … [Here] He can easily secure this livelihood by just making fools of people.

In the quote the narrator's attitude towards the Brahmin is all too apparent—from caricaturing Kane Pandit's appearance, which becomes the primary feature of this character and his nickname, to downplaying his ability and then despising him for "making fools of people". According to the principle put forward in a previous quote, Kane Pandit would definitely be categorised as "*hīn*" (inferior), despite his Brahmin identity.

In contrast, when portraying Sukkha, the narrator highlights his endurance, resistance and resilience in face of intimidation. The spirit of resistance embodied in Sukkha resonates with the rebellious spirit of his son Chandan.

> *Bāl yūṁ hī dhūp meṁ saphed nahīṁ hue the sukkhā ke. Jindagī meṁ bahut kuch dekhā aur bhog thā usane. Thākur sāhab ke namr virodh ko turant bhāṁp gayā vah. Use samajhte der nahīṁ lagī ki is sujhāv meṁ pracchann dhamkī thī. Uske man meṁ āyā ki sīdhe-sīdhe kah de ṭhākur sāhab se ki maiṁ tumhārī cāl ko samajhatā hūṁ ... Sab raste band ho gae lekin jīvan-bhar ghṛṇā, upekṣā aur apamān kā śikār hone vāle sukkhā meṁ svābhimān jāg gayā thā ab ... Sab kuch bardāśt kar lūṁgā maiṁ par candan ko is nark meṁ nahīṁ paṛane dūṁgā kabhī, jis narak meṁ mujhe rahanā paṛā hai.* (34-35)
>
> Sukkha had not grown grey without gaining knowledge and wisdom from life. He had seen and experienced a lot. He quickly perceived the soft intimidation of Thakur. It did not take him long to understand the threat hidden in his advice. He thought about telling Thakur directly, I saw through your trap … All the roads were closed, but the sense of self-pride suddenly arose in Sukkha, who had been the victim of hatred, neglect and disgrace for all his life … I can endure anything, but I will not let Chandan fall into the hell I am in now.

Corresponding to what has happened in the city, the changes in the village are also presented as natural and inevitable. When the influence of the Dalit movement begins to manifest itself in Matapur, the upper-caste people are either willing or forced to change their attitudes because the Dalits no longer consent to

their manipulation and exploitation. The landlord Harnam Thakur is trapped in a serious predicament thanks to non-cooperation of Dalit agricultural labour. I read this as a comment on the connection between the Dalit movement and agrarian relations—the rigid caste hierarchy is shaken thanks to the non-cooperating Dalits. A similar connection between changed agrarian relations and the Dalit movement appears in the other novel *Tarpaṇ*, as we shall see.

The reconfigured caste relations in the village require further consideration. For instance, how should the reader perceive the role of Rajini, daughter of the high-caste landlord herself who stands up against the oppression against the Dalit couple? Is this an act out of sympathy done by an upper-caste figure towards the pitiful low-caste? Amit Rai has rightly pointed out the conundrum associated with sympathetic acts:

> To sympathize with another, one must identify with that other. But sympathy, as I show, was a paradoxical mode of power. The differences of racial, gender, and class inequalities that increasingly divided the object and agent of sympathy were precisely what must be bridged through identification. Yet without such differences, which were differences of power, sympathy itself would be impossible: In a specific sense, sympathy produces the very inequalities it decries and seeks to bridge.[1]

Given Rajini's high-caste status, it is natural for the reader to see her acts as sympathetic to the low-caste. The point here is that the narrative accepts such an act without questioning the process of identification, which may be combined with objectification and patronising. I argue that the novel proposes an inclusive Dalit consciousness which disregards the identity of the agent. While Chandan is essentialised as a symbolic flag-bearer who advocates Dalit consciousness, Rajini's act represents the spirit of solidarity to fight with Dalits for the same goal of

[1] Rai, *Rule of Sympathy: Sentiment, Race, and Power 1750–1850*, xviii–xix; Francesca Orsini, review of *Review of Rule of Sympathy: Sentiment, Race, and Power, 1750-1850*, by Amit S. Rai, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 66, no. 3 (2003): 510–12.

establishing an equal and rational society. This makes her motivation and acts acceptable. On top of Rajini's solidarity, the change of Thakur Harnam at the end of the novel provides a dramatic sequence. The reconciliation between Harnam and Sukkha, I suggest, conveys the message that instead of aiming for revenge for the past ill-treatment, the Dalit movement is for the common good, and that treating everyone equally and respectfully is the source of happiness and peace in life. In contrast, as we shall see, the inter-caste conflict in *Tarpaṇ* is a premised on an act of vengeance. As the Thakur renounces his right to live in his big mansion and starts to live in an ordinary house with common people, Sukkha begins to address him by his name only instead of "Thakur Sahib". This scene speaks to the opening of the novel that describes the spatial segregation: when the discrepancy of caste vanishes, the spatial gap is naturally bridged. Although the transition of socio-economic relations in the village is recounted in a schematic way, without the fierce struggle that we will see in *Tarpaṇ*, the anticipation of a utopian rural space, I argue, presents the novel as a radical Dalit vision.

The storyline of the novel seems at times eclipsed by the overt assertions on Dalit consciousness and ideology. The recurrent speech-like manifestos also tend to tune the reader out of the plot from time to time, making the storytelling subordinate to the articulation of the political message. In the story, for example, there is a brief reference to Kamla, a woman who has endured a catastrophic gang rape, but this is only to make Chandan realise the resilience and power of Dalit women who should also be included in the enterprise of the Dalit movement.

The overarching political intention is also reflected in the lack of any specific regional coordinates, despite the fact that the reader is informed at the very beginning that the story is set in western Uttar Pradesh. The narrator uses standard Hindi throughout, devoid of any traces of regional language. This is because, I

would argue, the author intentionally presents the novel as a generic Dalit metanarrative of self-betterment and social transformation. The use of standard Hindi, a preference for universality over locality, enables the text to reach the largest possible audience and correspond to the grand political agenda.

Chappar envisages a utopian solution to the Dalit question, suggesting the issue of caste can possibly be rectified with the help of Dalit ideology and the movement under the banner of Dalit consciousness. In the next section, what we see is a much more complex picture in the era of post-Dalit assertion presented in the realist novel *Tarpaṇ* by Shivmurti.

Tarpaṇ: A Realist Portrayal of Contemporary Dalit Resistance

Almost ten years after *Chappar* was first published, *Tarpaṇ* (2004) ideally counters *Chappar*'s image of a utopian and egalitarian society and indicates that the struggle of Dalits continues to dominate the caste dynamics. The rule of Dalits has not come, yet.

I would argue that Shivmurti's identity as a non-Dalit dissociates the narrator of *Tarpaṇ* from the tendency to concentrate exclusively on Dalits. While *Chappar*'s plot invariably focuses on the Dalit characters, although the story in *Tarpaṇ* revolves around an organised Dalit resistance against high-caste exploitation, Dalit characters do not dominate the plot in the same way. Instead, the narrator of *Tarpaṇ* treats the upper castes on a par with the Dalits and offers an exhaustive account of how they counter the actions of the Dalits with great efforts. In other words, both Dalits and the upper castes get relatively equal narrative space.

The two novels also vary in characterisation. The main Dalit characters in *Chappar* are invariably portrayed as fully equipped with Dalit consciousness. Chandan, the protagonist, serves as an impeccable role model for the Dalit

community in resisting the casteist social structure. Instead of focusing on one single protagonist, *Tarpaṇ* conforms to the regionalist writing model wherein a larger cast of characters are given relatively equal stress, and it is difficult to identify a protagonist out of the entire cast of characters. Moreover, as we shall see, the Dalit community in *Tarpaṇ* is not a monolithic entity that aims for the common good. Instead, they draw the motivation for resistance from their humiliation and people act according to their own interests in the process.

Another point that significantly distinguishes *Tarpaṇ* from *Chappar* is the portrayal of Dalit resistance in a realist manner. While *Chappar* intentionally avoids the ordeal of the Dalit movement and focuses on articulating Dalit *cetnā*, *Tarpaṇ* provides a blow-by-blow account of how both the Dalits and the high-caste alliance seek to block each other's actions with the help of social connections. *Tarpaṇ*, I argue, provides a vivid example of how the contemporary Dalit question has gradually shifted from demanding social equality to a new phase in which the Dalits fight for their *izzat* or dignity.

Shivmurti and *Tarpaṇ*

Shivmurti (b. 1950), the author of *Tarpaṇ* (*The Offering*), is among the most eminent contemporary Hindi writers to write extensively about the Indian village. He is originally from a village named Kurang in the Sultanpur district of Uttar Pradesh. Like other writers representing rural life, Shivmurti also has first-hand experience of the Indian village. Apart from having spent his childhood in a village, by working as a government official for most of his life Shivmurti has continuously maintained a close relationship with the local rural world. His sustained interactions with village people have been the source of his creative inspiration.[1] The writer has claimed in an

[1] In a speech given at Pondicherry University in 2014, Shivmurti told the audience that his famous story *Tiriyā Carittar* (*The Fallen Woman*, 1987) was partly based on the story of a woman he met in a

interview that, "I accept that in my writing there is only reality", an eye-catching statement that also became the title of the interview.[1] This is a claim often and repeatedly made by Hindi writers and critics when reflecting on works about the Indian village. However, in sharp contrast to the utopian style of *Chappar*, Shivmurti clearly adopts a realist style in his delineations of characters, dialogue, and rural setting.

Shivmurti first began publishing in the 1970s and has so far two short story collections and three novels to his credit.[2] His writings cover a wide range of themes connected to the Indian village, including women, village politics and Dalits, as we see in *Tarpaṇ*. Unlike Jai Prakash Kardam and other self-proclaimed Dalit writers, Shivmurti neither comes from a Dalit background nor does he maintain a close relationship with the circles of Dalit writers, as he himself admits.[3] While Dalit writers clearly focus on Dalit subjects in their writings as part of their political commitment towards exposing and uprooting "Brahminism" or casteist consciousness, Shivmurti does not have this "natural" responsibility to give voice to or speak on behalf of the Dalit community. His clarification of "not being close to Dalit writers" indicates that Shivmurti has no intention to be labelled as a Dalit or even pro-Dalit writer. In other words, there is a purposefully drawn line between Shivmurti and the Dalit literary sphere.

The controversy over the positionality of non-Dalit writers writing on Dalits, if no longer in the foreground, continues to bubble under the surface. This possibly explains why Shivmurti was asked about the reaction of Dalit writers to *Tarpaṇ*

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local village working as a government official. Shivmurti also wrote an article in response to enquiries and debates regarding the protagonist of the story. See Shivmurti, 'Tiriyā Carittar Kī Nāyikā Ke Nām Patr', *Vartmān Sāhitya* 16, no. 3 (March 1997).

[1] The original Hindi is "*main māntā hūṁ ki mere yahāṁ sirf yathārth hai*". See Shivmurti and Oma Sharma, 'Mere Yahāṁ Sirf Yathārth Hai', *Lamhi* 5, no. 2 (December 2012): 27.

[2] Apart the short story collection *Keśar Kastūrī* published in 1991 and *Kuccī kā kānūn* (2016), Shivmurti's literary production include three novels, namely *Triśūl* (1995), *Tarpaṇ* (2004), *Ākhirī Chalāṁg* (2008), All of them focus on the village.

[3] See Shivmurti and Sharma, 'Mere Yahāṁ Sirf Yathārth Hai', 19.

during the interview already referred to.[1] In contrast to Dalit writers who tend to focus on Dalits/Dalitness *per se*, Shivmurti views the Dalit issue as part of his larger concern with the "struggles and fears of the people".[2] He writes about Dalits as part of the contemporary rural world and addresses the struggle of Dalits as part of that overarching agenda. So, instead of limiting himself to Dalit narratives, Shivmurti also writes on other subject matters in his works.[3] This is arguably the most discernible difference between Dalit and non-Dalit writers.

Shivmurti provides the reader with a nuanced depiction of an organised Dalit resistance against upper-caste oppression but also explores the predicament of upper-caste characters with equal subtlety. The writer himself is aware of the fact that his positionality informs his representation. Reflecting upon the difference between his writing about Dalits and that by Dalit writers, Shivmurti suggests that the dissimilarity stems from personal experience:

> In fact, the literary creation of Dalit writers is based on the capacity of self-experience. But when one rises above personal misery and pain, writes about a larger society, a literary works is created. Maybe that is the difference. [4]

Writing on the village is Shivmurti's conscious choice. Demonstrating a firm commitment to the village, he has set each of his works in the rural world. In an article on the situation of contemporary Hindi story writing, Shivmurti has pointed out the lack of representations of the "problems, concerns, structures and situations of the rural realm".[5] The writer seeks to remedy this lack by prioritising the village over the city throughout his writing career.[6]

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[1] Shivmurti and Sharma, 19.
[2] Shivmurti and Sharma, 23.
[3] See Shivmurti, *Keśar Kastūrī* (Rajkamal Prakashan, 2007).
[4] Shivmurti and Sharma, 'Mere Yahāṁ Sirf Yathārth Hai', 19.
[5] This is cited from an article based on a speech given at a conference in 1990. It is available on the writer's personal blog. See Shivmurti, 'Samkālīn Hindi Kahānī: Diśā aur uskī Cunautiyaṁ', accessed 9 December 2016, http://shivmurti.blogspot.co.uk/2009/10/blog-post_23.html.
[6] See Shivmurti and Sharma, 'Mere Yahāṁ Sirf Yathārth Hai', 23.

As I have mentioned previously in this chapter, for many Dalit writers, especially when writing autobiographically, the village tends to be portrayed as the starting point of their painful life-experience as victims of caste discrimination. To leave the exploitative rural space behind therefore becomes an intuitive choice for Dalit writers as well as the Dalit characters in Dalit writing. Such an inclination is also evident in *Chappar*, where we first encounter the protagonist Chandan as he moves to the city. Shivmurti's focus on the village without narratives of escape can arguably be linked to what he suggests the root of difference between his writing and Dalit writing—his position as an observer rather than an experiencing subject.

First serialised in the Hindi literary magazine *Tadbhav* in 2002 and then published by the renowned Hindi publishing house Rajkamal Prakashan as an individual book, *Tarpaṇ* was Shivmurti's second novel. Before starting my textual analysis, let me again provide a brief synopsis and introduce the main characters. The story begins with an attempted rape taking place in a fictional north Indian village named Badgaon. The Dalit girl Rajpatti is stopped in the field by Chandar, the son of Dharmu Pandit, who has been hiding and waiting for her. But Chandar encounters an unexpected resistance from Rajpatti, whose screams call other Dalit women nearby, and together they drive away Chandar, whose rape attempt goes unfulfilled.

News of the incident soon spreads across the entire village. Rajpatti's father Piyare complains to Dharmu about his son's wrongdoing in great anger. In order to prevent the situation from aggravating, Dharmu promises to punish Chandar, while at the same time warns Piyare that it is not in his interest to get involved in further trouble. However, some young people of the Dalit community take this as a chance to enact retribution on the upper castes for their constant brutality and urge Piyare to

report this incident to the police, despite the fact that some elders in the community as well as Piyare himself remain doubtful.

A local Dalit leader Bhaiji (literally "Brother"), whose name remains unrevealed throughout the narrative, is also called upon for help. Calling it a "strategy", Bhaiji persuades everyone to report an actual rape case to the police. Thus, under Bhaiji's leadership, an organised campaign of resistance in the name of dignity (*izzat*) brews, which provokes counter-action by the upper castes. Dharmu appeals to the Thakurs in the village and forms an alliance to oppose the Dalits. The case soon is transformed into a contention between upper castes in the village and the organised Dalits. Utilising not only personal networks within the caste-based community but also large amounts of money, both parties reach out to the police, the local authorities and even the judiciary to turn the case to their own advantage. The whole process is full of twists and turns, which form most of this compact novel. Chandar is jailed several times, with great damage to the Brahmins' reputation. On the other hand, the long drawn-out struggle, which requires considerable financial resources, exacerbates Piyare's impoverishment. The novel ends with a dramatic scene in which Piyare insists on going to jail in place of his son Munna, who has cut Chandar's nose during a brawl. Piyare regards it as an honour and "offering" (*tarpaṇ*) to the ancestors after the long history of submitting to the oppression by the upper castes.

In the next section, I focus on *Tarpaṇ*'s representation of the rural space, which is significantly different from "the rule of Dalits" at the end of Kardam's novel, and its realistic delineation of Dalit characters. As the upper castes gradually lose their economic domination, Dalits become defiant, a defining feature of the image of Dalits in this era, and inter-caste relationship thus becomes more complex.

However, unlike *Chappar* in which the Dalits are portrayed as a monolithic entity, Shivmurti's approach exposes their internal conflicts.

The Dalits of this Era

Unusually, *Tarpaṇ,* published almost a decade after *Chappar*, does not provide in the opening a geographical layout of Badgaon village highlighting the spatial segregation between Dalits and upper castes, as we see in *Chappar* and in *Phāṁs* (Ch. 3)*,* but begins with a description of the changed agrarian relations between the village high castes and the Dalits. Like *Chappar, Tarpaṇ* also shows that the equation of Dalits and upper castes has been reshaped and that exploitative-exploited model has changed, but it is still a complex one:

> *Is gāṁv ke ṭhākuroṁ-bābhanoṁ ko ab manamāphika majdūr kam milte haiṁ. Pandrah-solah gharoṁ kī camrauṭī meṁ do-tī ghar hī inkī majdūrī karte haiṁ. Bākī aurateṁ jyādātar ās-pās ke gāṁvoṁ meṁ madhyavartī jāti ke kisānoṁ ke khet meṁ kām karnā pasand kartī haiṁ aur puruṣ śahar jākar dihaṛī karnā. Caudhrāin auratoṁ ko khuś rakhnā jāntī hai. Kabhī gannā, ālū yā śakarkand kā 'ghelvā' dekar, kabhī apne ṭī.vī. meṁ 'mahābhārat' yā 'jai hanumān' dikhākar.* (7)
>
> The Thakurs and Brahmins of this village get very limited labour. Among the fifteen-sixteen Chamar families, only two or three work for them. Most of the Chamar women prefer to work in the fields of middle castes in nearby villages; the men go to the city to earn daily wages. The village headman's wife knows how to please the [Dalit] women – sometimes by giving the petty favours of sugarcane, potato and sweet potato, sometimes by letting them watch the Mahabharat and Jai Hanuman on TV.

The first half of this passage mirrors the effects of the Dalit movement delineated in *Chappar*: the Dalit workers have cast off the yoke binding them to the exploitation at the hands of high-caste landlords and have chosen alternative employment in nearby villages. Yet, unlike *Chappar*, where the Dalits' refusal to cooperate leads to a final resolution, the situation in *Tarpaṇ* does not seem straightforward. The changing

political economy of the village characterised by a broadened range of choices available to agricultural labour lands the conventional exploiters in trouble, but the second half of the passage shows how the wife of the village headman, a representative of upper castes, adjusts to the new circumstances and manages to rope in Dalit women workers by giving them extra petty favours. That is to say, the upper castes are gradually, if not completely, losing their economic grip on the Dalits, but they are still making a great effort to maintain the dominating status. Dalits, on the contrary, have been able to free themselves from the dependence on the traditional high-caste employers.

The changing economic circumstances have had polarised effects on Dalits and upper castes. For Dalits, the awareness of the need to resist the brutality of upper castes has grown, whereas the upper-caste people, who recognise the threat posed by the rise of Dalits, hold on to the agenda of asserting their superiority. The rise of the Dalits clearly amounts to a decline of upper castes, a fact that the upper castes are not ready to accept. This is how the tensions and contradictions expand, and they are well captured in the opening scene of the novel—the unfulfilled rape.

Stopped by Chandar in the field under the excuse that she has been stealing peas, the Dalit girl Rajpatti does not submit to Chandar's intimidation. Her insubordination irritates the Brahmin young man:

> *"Khabardār." Vah pichṛte hue gurrāyī, "dūr hī rahnā. Maiṁ khud dikhātī hūṁ."*
>
> *Khabardār? Khabardār bolnā kab sīkh gaīṁ in 'nānhoṁ' kī chokriyāṁ? Itnī himmat!* (9)
>
> "Watch yourself." She stepped back and shout out, "Stay there, I'll show you."
>
> Watch yourself? When have these 'low-status' girls learnt to say watch yourself? How dare they!

Rajpatti before Chandar is in a situation of double subjugation—of Brahminical patriarchy due to of her caste status and of sexual domination because of her gender. Chandar's response of "these low-status girls" to her "watch yourself", which he does not expect to hear from the mouth of a Dalit girl, also suggests that he understands Rajpatti's defiance and challenge to his superiority in both dimensions. As Chandar tries to force himself on Rajpatti, he encounters stiff resistance from her, and her screams call in other Dalit women to the scene, who make a concerted effort to drive Chandar away.

This entire incident brings to Rajpatti's father Piyare's mind the traumatic memory of his first daughter Surasti, who tragically ended her life by jumping into a well ten years earlier. Although the narrative does not disclose what exactly happened to Surasti, it can be inferred that she was also a victim of sexual abuse. The oblique reference to Surasti, I suggest, also invites comparison with Rajpatti's stance, indicating the changing role of Dalits from victims of violence to protesters. Therefore, even though Rajpatti manages to escape the attempted rape, Piyare still goes to Dharmu's house with a stick in hand, and fulminates against his son's wrongdoing. Just like Rajpatti, who immediately displayed vigilance and resistance during the confrontation with Chandar, Piyare's attitule before Dharmu is similarly defiant:

> *Piyare dandanātā huā unke sāmne pahuṁctā hai, "mahārāj, āp hī ke pās āe haiṁ. Batā dījie ki is gāṁv meṁ raheṁ ki nikal jaeṁ? Āp logoṁ kin ajar meṁ garīb-gurbā kī koī ijjat nahiṁ hai?"*
>
> *Dharmū ko piyāre kā pailgī-praṇām na karnā bahut akhrā lekin jāhir nahiṁ hone diyā. Ab to yah ām rivāj hotā jā rahā hai. Ve śānt svar meṁ bolte haiṁ,"kuch batāoge bhī, bāt kyā hai? Tum to lagtā hai phaujdārī karne ae ho."* (13)
>
> Piyare comes before him thundering, "Maharaj, I come to you. Please tell me, should we stay in the village or leave? Don't poor people have any dignity in the eyes of your people?"

> That Piraye did not greet him respectfully annoys Dharmu a lot, but Dharmu does not reveal his annoyance. It has become normal nowadays. He speaks in a peaceful voice, "Why don't you tell me what the matter is? You seem to have come to fight a criminal case."

Instead of greeting the Brahmin man respectfully, Piyare starts the conversation by addressing Dharmu directly as "Maharaj", which annoys Dharmu because he feels the considerable disparity between the respect he used to get from a Dalit and the cursory greeting he now gets. That esteem no longer exists. "Maharaj" is still a form of deferent address, but Piyare's tone when he asks the following rhetorical questions carries a mixed sense of imploration and reproach. The fact that Piyare has come to meet Dharmu with a stick in his hand, suggests that he is ready if not for violent confrontation at least to boost his morale and for self-protection. Piyare's way of speaking to Dharmu embodies a kind of nuanced ambivalence—Piyare cannot fully get rid of the notion that Brahmins are to be respected. Piyare uses "*āp*", the formal and polite form of "you" in Hindi, but in return he only gets "*tum*", a less formal form of address. Dharmu still wants to assert his superiority as a Brahmin and expects more than just "Maharaj" or "*āp*". At the same time, he has no choice but to accept the changing circumstances.

The quote also shows that instead of acting on an impulse and exploding with fury the moment he sees Dharmu, Piyare chooses a moderate, cautious but firm approach. While the argument between the two lingers, Dharmu's wife cuts in with a highly casteist abuse, bringing the confrontation to a higher level:

> *"Ek bār camāin kā rāj kyā āyā, sāre camār, pāsī khopṛī par mūtne lage. Itnī himmat ki laṭhi lekar ghar par orhan dene caḍh āe".* (14)
>
> "Once the rule of a Chamar woman comes, all Chamars and Pasis will piss on our heads. How dare you come here with a stick to threaten us?"

So far, before Dharmu's wife's intervention, the issue of caste bubbling under the surface had not been raised explicitly by either party. Now however, inflamed by this remark, Piyare answers Dharmu's wife back with an assertion of Dalit identity—he still uses *āp* but with no deference:

> *"Kisī gumān meṁ mat bhūlie paṇḍitāin. Ab ham ū camār nahiṁ haiṁ ki kān, pūṁch dabākar sab sah, sun leṁge."* (14)
>
> "Don't keep your mistaken assumption, Panditain. We are now no longer those Chamars who used to endure and heed everything with our ears and tail tucked in."

Compared to the portrayal of Dalits in *Chappar*, here in *Tarpaṇ*, a clear difference is characterised by the lack of a transition in the Dalits, from a stage of ignorance about their exploitation to one of full awareness. *Tarpaṇ* illustrates an era in which Dalits no longer need to be enlightened about their exploitation and domination by the upper castes by a pioneer—like Chandan in *Chappar*. They are acutely aware of the circumstances.

Moreover, as a realist narrative, *Tarpaṇ* does not avoid showing the divergent opinions among the Dalit community, unlike *Chappar* in which the Dalits appear a monolithic group under the protagonist's leadership. As I have already argued, the narrative politics of *Chappar* is to promote a reformist Dalit ideology, and the representation of a united Dalit community caters to this narrative aim. It is thus not difficult to understand why the narrative of *Chappar* diverts from the realist style. By contrast, the narrator in *Tarpaṇ* delineates a more complex picture in terms of what is going on within the Dalit community so as to achieve a more realistic representation. *Tarpaṇ* does not refrain from showcasing cracks in the community's façade of unity—not only does conflict of interests exist within the community, but also different people seek to manipulate this incident to their own advantage, as my analysis will illustrate. Through a nuanced account of the divergent views within the

Dalit community, *Tarpaṇ* further complicates the picture. Following the encounter between Piyare and Dharmu, a clear difference emerges between younger generation and the elders with regard to how they should treat this sexual assault. The young people are more aggressive and insist on reporting the assault to the police—first, to make their village a template of resistance against upper castes so as to inspire and consolidate nearby Dalit communities, and second, to wreak vengeance on the upper castes who drive a wedge among the Dalit community. Even though he agrees to the logic behind the proposal, Piyare is reluctant to get involved with the police because he fully understands the potential expense it will entail:

> *"Thānā pulis meṁ bāt le jāne kā matlab hai das gārī aur sau-do sau kā kharcā. Das din kā akāj ūpar se. Natījā kuch nahiṁ."* (15-16)
>
> Taking the incident to the police means loads of abuse and one-two hundred in expenses. On top of that, ten days without work. And no result.

The further development of the incident seems partly consistent with Piyare's prediction. Unable to persuade these zealous young people, though, Piyare suggests they ask the elders of the community for advice. They display even deeper revulsion at the potential trouble of involving the police and legal procedure:

> *"Dalpat bābā kā mat hai ki thānā-pulis aur koṭ-kaceharī meṁ dauṛnā apnā hī khūn pine jaisā hai. Dauṛte-dauṛte sir ke bāl jhaṛ jāte haiṁ.*
>
> *...*
>
> *Vakīl, muṁśī, peśkār to bahelie haiṁ baheliye. Hamlog bhī koṭ-kaceharī jāne ke lie nikalte haiṁ to samjho baheliyā ke peṭ meṁ hī jāne ke lie nikalte haiṁ."* (17-18)
>
> "Dalpat baba reckons that rushing back and forth between the police station and the court is like drink your own blood. Your hair will fall off in the whole running around.
>
> …

> Lawyers, drafters and court officers are like hunters. Going to the court is like we walk right into the hunter's stomach."

As we can see from the quotes, the older generation, including Piyare himself and the elders, harbour serious apprehensions about the repercussions if the plan proposed by the younger generation is followed. It is significant to note that the older generation is not concerned about confronting the upper-castes but about involving the state—including the police and law court. In their minds, the state will inevitably side with the upper castes, and will act as an exploiter against them in the era when the hegemonic position the upper-caste is being challenged.

Their polarised opinions are finally reconciled with the intervention of Bhaiji, a local young Dalit leader. However, the internal split of the Dalit community is deeper than this. Despite being a minor character, Lavangi plays an important role in the development of the plot. While the whole community reach an agreement to boycott the offer made by the upper-caste to work for them and to report the attempted rape case, Lavangi turns her back on her own people. She not only works for Dharmu but also serves as a spy who discloses to the Brahmin family the plans conceived by the Dalits in exchange for substantial rewards, which the Brahmin wife is reluctant to offer. Even though Lavangi is not constantly referred to in the narrative, the reader understands that she is behind the unexpected twists and turns in the storyline.

Lavangi shows that the Dalit community is not monolithic. As the plot moves forward, the reader comes to know that Bhaiji has been feuding with Chandar for a long time, and the collective resistance is also to use his authority to revenge on a personal enemy. More significantly, as far as the politics of representation is concerned, the deployment of different Dalit characters with individualised concerns coexisting in the community diverts from the paradigmatic narrative strategy

employed in Dalit literature that celebrates the "goodness" of Dalit characters, as we have seen in *Chappar*. In *Tarpaṇ* there are different Dalit characters with different motivations, who seek to use the incident for their own interest. This distinguishes Shivmurti from other self-identifying Dalit writers, who bear the intrinsic responsibility of upholding Dalits characters against stigmatising accounts, as we have seen in their criticism of Premchand. I argue that *Tarpaṇ*, through the account of internal conflicts of the Dalit community, registers a departure from the "melodramatic realism", the formula proposed by Laura Brueck to characterise the narrative realism of Dalit literature.[1] The realistic delineation we see in *Tarpaṇ* is much less dramatic in the sense that the Dalits are not impeccably good just as the upper castes are not completely villainous; each act is in their best interest. This type of realism which does not aim at moral persuasion, I suggest, is facilitated by the positionality of the narrator/writer who narrates from a non-Dalit perspective.

The most striking aspect of the novel, however, is how the Dalits make an issue of the attempted rape, and how they gradually learn to play the game of politics as a result.

A War over *Izzat*

The campaign between the organised Dalits and the upper-caste alliance highlights the growing significance of *izzat* in the course of the resistance. As I have shown earlier, the narrative of *Tarpaṇ* unfolds in an era when the changing economic circumstances are reshaping the relationship between the upper-castes and the Dalits in the village. With less agricultural Dalit labour willing to work for them, high-caste farmers have to put in extra effort to ingratiate themselves with the Dalit labourers. At the same time, Dalits are consolidating their position in the power equation in the

[1] See Brueck, 'Good Dalits and Bad Brahmins: Melodramatic Realism in Dalit Short Stories'.

village and become increasingly defiant of the violence and exploitation imposed on them due to their traditionally disadvantaged status.

Apart from the economic context that works as a decisive force in the reshuffle of the caste power dynamics, another crucial element is at play within both parties and complicates the situation to a further extent, concerning the importance of *izzat*. *Izzat*, loosely defined as honour, dignity and pride, is essential to understanding the motivation behind the actions and behaviour of both the upper-caste and the Dalits in the novel. It is both the starting and ending point of the entire conflict. As a principle of everyday life and a crucial organising principle within Indian society, *izzat* implies the obligation to uphold and protect the honour of the individual and, more importantly of the community to which the individual belongs.[1]

I suggest that *izzat* be imagined as part of what Pierre Bourdieu defines as "social capital", "field" and "habitus". Unlike Marx, who saw capital as key in the relations of production, Bourdieu regards capital as a resource that yields power, and this includes immaterial forms of capital, including social, cultural, and symbolic capital.[2] It is the relationship between power and social capital theorised by Bourdieu that is helpful to understand the assertion of *izzat* in the narrative context of this novel. The actions to accumulate and transform resources and power take place in a "field", a setting in which agents are located in positions according to the specific capital allocated to them. Meanwhile, the field is fluid because of the constant actions of "position-taking".[3] The social structure of the village resembles such a

[1] Yasmin Khan, 'Izzat', in *Key Concepts in Modern Indian Studies*, ed. Gita Dharampal et al. (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2015), 128–29.
[2] Craig Calhoun, 'Habitus, Field, and Capital: The Question of Historical Specificity', in *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Craig J. Calhoun, Edward LiPuma, and Moishe Postone, Repr (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 69; Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. Richardson, trans. Richard Nice (New York: Greenwood, 1986).
[3] Richard Harker, Cheleen Mahar, and Chris Wilkes, 'The Basic Theoretical Position', in *An Introduction to the Work of Pierre Bourdieu*, ed. Richard Harker, Cheleen Mahar, and Chris Wilkes (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1990), 8.

field, in which people are located according to their caste, which is one kind of capital, but their positions are only relatively fixed thanks to the ever-changing caste relations and to other factors, including economic wealth, education, and so on. The idea of "habitus", which Bourdieu defines as "necessity internalised and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-given perceptions", is used to understand the struggles for positions and resources between agents in a field.[1] In the novel, *izzat* functions as a form of habitus which informs the practices of each member of the caste group, which strive to protect their *izzat*. It can also be seen as a form of social capital, a "credential" and "common name" linked to caste, to use Bourdieu's term, shared and upheld collectively by members of a caste that provides the institutional guarantee of the possession and maintenance of privilege attached to it.[2] However, due to its relational nature, no caste cannot secure long-lasting *izzat*, which is also attached to other social signifiers and has to be reinforced and accumulated through endless effort. Any form of damage to *izzat* entails not only humiliation (*śaram*) but also losing of social status and power. On top of that, *izzat* has strong gender implications, since the honour of an individual, family, and community is believed to be held in a major way by the chastity of its women.[3]

Izzat has symbolic manifestations as we see in the novel. For Brahmins, for instance, whether they can attract Dalit agricultural labour to work for them has become an indicator of *izzat*. And protecting *izzat* is high on their agenda as an attempt to maintain their dominant status:

[1] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 170.
[2] Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital'.
[3] Khan, 'Izzat'.

> *Panḍitāin ke lie yah ijjat kī bāt thī. Āj ke jamāne meṁ 'halvāl' rakhnā darvāje par hāthī bāṁdhne se jyādā 'ijjat' kī bāt ho gaī hai.* (21)
>
> For the Panditain this is a matter of izzat. Today, in terms of izzat, having people cultivating for you is more relevant than tying an elephant at the gate.

This quote, like the previous one, shows that the village headman's wife has to offer petty favours in order to rope in enough agricultural labour. Not only do the changing economic circumstances require the upper castes to put in more effort, but the obligation to salvage their *izzat* also plays a significant role in decision-making. Coming back to the character of Lavangi, the quote also reveals the reason why the Panditain has no choice but to accept her excessive demands in order to keep this informer. By contrast, the Dalits, coming from a position with lesser and more vulnerable *izzat*, aim to hurt the *izzat* of the upper castes as a retribution for their long-standing humiliation.

Marking a new phase of Dalit resistance, the coming of Bhaiji in the village consolidates the community and an organised resistance eventually materialises under his leadership. Dispelling Piyare's misgivings about reporting the incident as an actual rape case to the police, Bhaiji highlights the significance of the struggle in the name of *izzat*:

> *Vah varg saṅgharṣ thā. Roṭi ke lie. Yah varṇ saṅgharṣ hai. Ijjat ke lie. Ijjat kī laṛāī roṭī se jyādā jarúrī hai. Isīlie is laṛāī ke lie sarkār ne hameṁ alag se kānūn diyā hai. Harijan ecṭ! Ham is kānūn se is nāg ko nātheṁge.* (26)
>
> That was class struggle. For bread. This is caste struggle. For izzat. The struggle for izzat is more important. That why the government has entitled to us an alternative law. The Harijan Act! We will take advantage of this act to bring it under control.

The quote reveals that instead of conflating the questions of caste and class as we saw in *Chappar*, Dalits are fully aware the difference of the two—the Dalits'

collective reaction aims to address the humiliation and brutality they have been suffering due to the disadvantaged status in the caste hierarchy. And in an era when Dalit mobilisation has gained momentum in economic terms and the Harijan Act in favour of the Dalits has been passed, the issue of *izzat* is foregrounded in this campaign above other concerns.[1]

Unlike *Chappar*'s glossing over the struggle the Dalit movement has to face, *Tarpaṇ* lays considerable emphasis on recounting the process of the caste conflict following Dalit assertion. *Tarpaṇ* details several reversals in the course of the conflict and provides a well-knit plot full of twists and turns as opposed to the schematic storyline of *Chappar*. The twist-oriented plot also delivers a more enjoyable reading experience as the reader is constantly curious to find out the developmental trajectory of the incident.[2] As critic Ram Bax points out in a review, "the Dalits and the Brahmins are fighting a war base on a lie (*jhūṭh kī laṛāī*, by which the critic is referring to reporting an actual rape) against each other, but the pain they experience during the course is real".[3] In addition to emphasising the pain and losses suffered by both parties in the course of the contention, I suggest, *Tarpaṇ* also demonstrates how particularly the Dalits are able to adapt to the exploitative state and learn to manipulate it through personal and familial connections so as to serve their own purpose.

The first round of engagement between the Dalits and the Brahmins happens when Bhaiji takes Piyare and Vikram, a young activist of the community, to report

[1] "Harijan Act" refers to Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, an Act of the Parliament of India enacted to prevent atrocities against scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. It is interesting to note that Bhaiji as a Dalit activist uses the word "Harijan", an expression coined by Gandhi but condemned by Dalits. For more on the politics of categorisation and naming of Dalits, See Gopal Guru, 'The Language of Dalit-Bahujan Political Discourse.', in *Class, Caste, Gender*, ed. Manoranjan Mohanty, 2001, 256–70.
[2] Thanks to the fact that the Shivmurti's novel is highly plot-driven and thus cinematic, it has been adapted to a film in 2017, see Neelam Singh, *Tarpan: The Salvation*, n.d., https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7627646/.
[3] Ram Bax, 'Varṇ Vyavsthā Kā Tarpaṇ', *Kathādeś*, February 2006.

the rape to the police *thānā*, only to find out that Dharmu has already come before them. The news comes as a shock for both the Dalit characters and the reader as it marks an unexpected turn in the course of the plot—suddenly the Dalits are forced to react when they were the ones to take the initiative. Although the narrative does not disclose why Dharmu manages to forestall the Dalits and be quicker to reach out to the police, it can be inferred that Lavangi may have had a hand in this, a presage of the thorny situation that the Dalits have to deal with. At the front gate of the police station the Dalits are stopped and interrogated at length by a chowkidar who asks their purpose of visit, as if instructed to do so. As the leader of the Dalit trio, Bhaiji is also the focus of the scene. The narrator does not refrain from portraying the predicament of Bhaiji, who looks strong on the surface, but is inwardly weak and worried before the guard.

> *Thāne ke lie ravāngī ke sāth hī bhāi jī apne ko andar se majbūt karne meṁ lage haiṁ. Jyoṁ-jyoṁ andar ḍar baḍh rahā hai tyoṁ-tyoṁ bāhar se boḷd dikhne kī kośiś kar rahe haiṁ. Ve atyaṁt tucch bhāv se pahare ko ghūrte haiṁ — "tumhīṁ iṁcārj lage ho kya?"* (28)
>
> Bhaiji begins to strengthen himself when they leave for the police station. As the fear grows inside, he tries to look bold. Glaring at the guard with a sense of extreme hollowness, he says — "You seem to be in charge?"

The encounter with the chowkidar only heralds their unpleasant journey to the police station. Indifferent about the dirty, low-caste and poor clients, the Munshi in the office not only refuses to write the report for them but also dismisses their request for free paper. The trio is thus forced to buy paper and write down the case on their own at a nearby tea stall. When leaving the police station, they are stopped again by the chowkidar who charges the fees for parking their bicycle. So far in the narrative, the role of the police resonates with what we have seen in *Almā Kabūtarī,* that they align with the high-caste and are completely exploitative towards the Dalits.

Yet the Dalits are resilient and continue their action despite the setbacks. Seeing the trio return to the police station, the Munshi asks them to wait for the Daroga. Despite the agonisingly tedious and long wait, Bhaiji manages to suppress his anger and not irritate the Munshi, something which, he believes, would only do harm to themselves (*apnā hī nuksān hogā*, 33). Instead of being entirely at the mercy of the exploitative police, here Bhaiji, as the narrator points out, also demonstrates tactical patience in order to achieve their goal. But after witnessing how a pitiful couple are tortured and intimidated recklessly by the Munshi, Bhaiji stands out to confront him with a line of dire threat:

> *"Das hajār kī bhīṛ lekar sabere thane ko nahīṁ gherā to apnā 'tūphānī' nām badal dūṁgā."* (37)
>
> "If I do not bring ten thousand people to gherao the police station next morning I will change my "stormy" name."

Compared to the previous quote that reveals Bhaiji's fear before the lower-ranking chowkidar, there is a discernable change here in his attitude. Attacking the weakness of the police—they are afraid of the collective power of the Dalit community—Bhaiji seems to know how to use threats to outwit the police, in drastic contrast to the previous portrayal of the Dalits only prone to exploitation. From here onwards, the Dalits gradually regain the initiative. The Daroga finally accepts their report, while warning Piyare that reporting an actual rape can land him and his daughter in great trouble—apart from the difficulty in dealing with a Brahmin family, the case is particularly harmful to the *izzat* of Rajpatti, evoking the gendered connotation of the concept. However, in defiance to Daroga's warning, Bhaiji decides to double down and reach out to a higher-level official, eventually resulting in Chandar's arrest and wholehearted humiliation. Far from only an exploitative agent, the police become pawns in the ambitious revenge plan of the Dalits.

The blow-by-blow account highlights the complexity of rural caste dynamics. For either party, there is no way to win the war once and for all. Putting Chandar behind bars is only a temporary victory for the Dalits, which does not last long. Using their family relations in the police, the Brahmins soon successfully bail Chandar out. Then the Dalits see Chandar's prompt vengeance—a gun raid on their *bastī*. However, instead of recoiling in fear, Bhaiji decides to appeal to a higher-up local Muslim MLA, with whom the Dalit party of this region has formed a political alliance. The Dalits under Bhaiji's leadership have gathered momentum by drawing in more local leaders, while the Brahmin family form an upper-caste alliance with the Thakurs in the village. The conflict soon produces a snowball effect as more officials get involved through personal and familial connections. In this way, the narrator charts the connections among local caste groups, police and politicians in terms of who can be approached and availed by which group. However, to match each other in strength is not without cost, and both sides have to invest heavily to approach political leaders, the police and the court. The Brahmins have dissipated all their family fortune, whereas the Dalits even plan to raise money from the entire community to win a "collective fight" (*sāmūhik laṛāī*, 78). I read this as a critique of the state—not only have the state institutions become an established presence in contemporary rural life, something unbiasedly exploitative against both caste groups, but more importantly, the corruption of the state can also function as an equaliser over caste.

The war continues to revolve around *izzat*. When Chandar is arrested for the second time the effort of the Dalits has finally paid off. Here, the narrative again nuances how *izzat* plays out. Since the police insist on arresting Chandar even after taking a bribe from his family, the narrative then shows Dharmu negotiating with the police officers about how his son should pass through the market road:

> *Ve āge baḍhkar ek bār phir kośiś karte haiṁ, "divan jī. Ek bāt kā viśvās diyā sakte haiṁ. Brāhmaṇ kī jabān hai, kaṭ nahiṁ saktī. Merā beṭā bhāge-parāegā nahiṁ. Hathkaṛī khol dījie, nahiṁ to bīc bājār ijjat nīlām ho jāegī".* (62)
>
> He comes close and tries for another time, "Divanji. I can confirm you one thing. A Brahmin never goes back on his words. My son will not escape. Please remove the handcuffs, otherwise our izzat will be sold at the market."

The market is a space of public exposure, and the fact that a Brahmin is exposed under arrest is harmful to their dignity. The deliberate capture of this detail by the narrator reinforces the idea that the principle of protecting *izzat* is an essential part of rural life and *izzat* plays an essential role in informing people's behaviour and decision-making. Even at the moment when Chandar is put under arrest—already an extremely harmful blow to the *izzat* of the Brahmins—Dharmu still seeks to minimise the negative effect on their reputation.

The similar mechanism of *izzat* invites a possible interpretation of the novel's closure, in which Piyare is curiously resolute in going to the prison in place of his son, who has cut off Chandar's nose during a fight. In contrast to Dharmu's anxiety about exposing to the public that Chandar is now under arrest, Piyare is so proud of his detention that he even requests to pass the market slowly, so as to exhibit their victory. This is followed by a remark by Piyare's wife, which reveals Piyare's motivation behind the bold decision: He will get freedom inside (*Isī meṁ inkī "muktī" hai*, 116.) "*Muktī*" (freedom) is a carefully chosen word, which, I suggest, contrasts Piyare's imminent physical confinement in prison with the freedom from the longlasting humiliation as a Dalit. The narrator in the end brings out the title of the novel by recognising Piyare's move as a "*tarpaṇ*", an offering to the community which have suffered from humiliation and oppression for generations. The ending, I suggest, indicates that Piyare's decision is more than a personal sacrifice, but a

compensation for their deprived *izzat* when they finally manage to hurt the *izzat* of the Brahmins so completely by cutting off Chandar's nose.

In comparison to *Chappar*'s closure, characterised by the reconciliation between the Dalits and upper castes, *Tarpaṇ* offers an open ending. The reader does not know if the war will continue, and it is also difficult to evaluate which group has won, given the high losses and sufferings of both sides. Unlike *Chappar,* which anticipates a utopian rural world characterised by the reconcilable caste disparity, *Tarpaṇ* demonstrates new possibilities of caste dynamics in the era of post-Dalit assertion, and constructs a rural world permeated with conflict, a far cry from the utopian vision.

Conclusion

The depiction of Dalits is among the most relevant topics in contemporary Hindi village writing, which has registered a significant departure from that of Premchand. Premchand's "sympathetic" portrayal of rural Dalit subjects has invited serious criticism from Dalit writers and critics according to the militant aesthetics of "Dalit *cetnā*".

But unlike the narratives through recounting their own humiliation and pain that characterise Dalit writers' autobiographies, and particularly their depictions of the village as the unhappy site of the discovery of caste identity, discrimination, and violence, the two novels examined in this chapter present one a utopian vision of struggle and resolution of caste conflict, the other a reality of caste politics as a never-ending game.

The comparative reading of *Chappar* and *Tarpaṇ* has allowed me to explore the politics of representation of rural Dalits in contemporary Hindi village fiction. One of the main reasons driving this comparison was that while *Chappar* is written

by a self-identifying Dalit writer, who is expected to speak for the Dalit community, *Tarpaṇ* is written by a non-Dalit author. It turns out that the writer's positionality does inform the way in which the Dalit question is addressed.

Unlike *Chappar,* in which Dalit characters are placed at the centre of the narrative, *Tarpaṇ* has a relatively equal distribution of narrative gaze between the Dalits and the upper castes. Although a spirit of resistance is evident in the Dalit characters in both texts, the novels differ in terms of their arrangement of characters. In *Chappar* Dalit characters are defined by their awareness of Dalit consciousness. The protagonist Chandan, in particular, is portrayed as an educated Dalit leading his community in a movement that seeks to end oppression and replace the casteist social structure. In comparison, it is difficult to identify a single protagonist in *Tarpaṇ.* In addition, the Dalit community is no longer a monolithic entity as we see in *Chappar*.

The two texts have divergent narrative aims. Intentionally avoiding the difficulties Dalits may experience in the course of the campaign, *Chappar* focuses on overtly articulating Dalit *cetnā*, and therefore serves as a blueprint for Dalit struggle. By contrast, *Tarpaṇ* does provides a blow-by-blow account of the conflicts between the Dalits and the high-caste alliance in a realist manner. Unlike the utopian vision in *Chappar*, *Tarpaṇ* indicates that the Dalits still have to face strong opposition from the upper castes, and inter-caste reconciliation is not an option in the contemporary circumstances. It exemplifies how contemporary Dalit question has gradually shifted from demanding social equality to a new phase in which the Dalits begin to fight for *izzat*, dignity.

Caste-linked poverty provides the opening theme of the next novel I discuss, which however inserts it within a broader range of rural lives. Sanjeev's novel

Phāṁs is perhaps the most topical among the texts I discuss in this thesis, dealing as it does with the burning issue of farmers' suicides.

Chapter 3

A Crying Call for the Distressed Farmers: *Phāṁs*

> *"Nahīṁ! Ek vidvān ne kahā hai ki śetī koī dhandhā nahīṁ, balki ek lāif sṭāil hai-jīne kā tarīkā, jise kisān any kisī bhī dhandhe ke calte nahīṁ choṛ saktā. So tum bābā … tum lakh kaho ki tum śetī choṛ doge, nahīṁ choṛ sakte. Kisānī tumhāre khūn meṁ hai."*
>
> "No! An intellectual once said that farming is not an occupation, but a life style—a way of living, which farmers cannot abandon for other occupations. So, dad … you always say that you are going to stop farming, but you cannot. Farming is in your blood."
>
> (*Phāṁs*, 14-15)

One of the reasons that drew my attention to the village before I started this project was the recurrent tragic media reports of suicides by Indian farmers.[1] These publicised suicide cases, together with government reports and academic publications, testify to the unpalatable fact that Indian agriculture is deeply in crisis.[2] In contrast to the general impression that farmers in India are either moving out of the village or diversifying their livelihoods, the epigraph from Sanjeev's novel *Phāṁs* suggests that agriculture still plays a decisive role in farmers' lives. In the context of intensified globalisation and urbanisation, these shocking incidents, unfortunately, became arguably the major opportunity for the Indian village to get some visibility in the media. But, as Vishal Bharti sadly points out, due to lack of

[1] One of the most eminent journalists covering farmers' suicides is P. Sainath, who has been following the issue since mid 2000s on *The Hindu*, a major newspaper where the reporter used to work with, and on other platforms. See https://psainath.org/category/the-agrarian-crisis/farmer-suicides/.

[2] See Jens Lerche, 'Agrarian Crisis and Agrarian Questions in India', *Journal of Agrarian Change* 11, no. 1 (2011): 104–18. In a recent monography on farmers' suicides in India, Nilotpal Kumar argues that the "amplification" of rural suicides in media and academia seeks to raise concerns on the prevailed urban-rural disparities and the impact on agriculture of economic liberalisation and globalisation, see Nilotpal Kumar, *Unraveling Farmer Suicides in India: Egoism and Masculinity in Peasant Life* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2–3.

substantial relatability to urban audience, even those cases still struggled to make it to the headlines.[1]

In parallel with the media and social science discourse on Indian farmers' suicides, Hindi writers have also responded to the ongoing crisis through an attempt to redirect public attention back to the village. In my personal correspondence with Subhash Chandra Kushwaha, who edited the 2006 Hindi short story anthology on the village entitled *Kathā meṁ Gāṁv* (Ch. 4), he told me that an unstated impetus behind the compilation of this collection was the explosion of farmers' suicides from the 1990s onwards, the most severe concentration of such cases ever that the country has witnessed in its history. In addition to providing a comprehensive investigation of contemporary Hindi village story writing, as I will show, the anthology also attempts to raise awareness of the rural predicament among urban readers, a point that the editor himself also mentions in the introduction.[2] Despite the large variety of rural themes of this collection, however, no story directly deals with the issue except for *Tilesarī*, which mentions a suicide case just as a complement to its main storyline.

Finally, in 2015 the novel *Phāṁs* (*The Noose*) by Sanjeev became the first Hindi novel on farmers' suicides, a theme that the metaphorical title and the cover picture hint at through a body hanging from a tree branch.[3] After the release, thanks partly to the burning topic, the novel created quite a stir in the Hindi literary circle and beyond. The prestigious literary magazine *Hans*, for instance, unusually published two reviews on *Phāṁs* in the November 2015 issue;[4] one of the leading

[1] Vishav Bharti, 'Indebtedness and Suicides: Field Notes on Agricultural Labourers of Punjab', *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, no. 14 (2011): 35–40.
[2] Subhash Chandra Kushwaha, 'Yah saṅgrah kyoṁ', in *Kathā meṁ Gāṁv: Bhāratīya Gāṁvoṁ kā Badaltā Yathārth*, ed. Subhash Chandra Kushwaha (Samvad Prakashan, 2006); see Chapter 4.
[3] This doctoral project began in 2014 and it was in 2016 when conducting my fieldwork in India that I found out this novel was heatedly discussed in the Hindi literary circle. It was a timely book for my project, suggesting that Hindi writers continue to pay attention to rural themes.
[4] The magazine usually publishes no more than three reviews on different book each in one single issue. The two reviews are Rakesh Bihari, 'Pragati Ke Sarkārī Sūckāṁkoṁ Ke Viruddh', *Hans*,

Hindi news outlets, *Aajtak*, also published an excerpt from the book.[1] At a time when the village has become distanced from the experience of urban Hindi readers as well as the general public, farmers' suicides have become an alarming signal that suggests that the lives of numerous cultivators in this country are in danger. Because of the gravity of the theme, reviewers have tended to pay attention to the issues associated with farmers' suicides in India instead of engaging closely with the novel itself. This tendency is evident in Vivek Mishra's evaluation of the novel:

> *Phāṁs* is not about the agrarian problems of any single farmer, any agricultural family, any village or any region; it has become a story of the pus of a wound, in which, for decades, the worms of religion, superstition, complicated caste system, oppressive feudal social structure—persistent long before the independence—are wriggling and now, on top of all these, political neglect and the infection of corruption have also spread out terribly.[2]

It is thus without doubt to claim that reviews of *Phāṁs* are largely driven by the theme it addresses.

This chapter, instead, in addition to the thematic concern, focuses on the techniques that *Phāṁs* employs to probe and represent the conundrum of farmers' suicides in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra. Like many other Hindi village texts, *Phāṁs* has been widely celebrated by critics for its uncompromising and authentic portrayal of rural reality and its comprehensive understandings of agrarian problems.[3] But, as I have suggested previously, representations of reality are always

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November 2015, 87–89; Sanjay Nawale, 'Rūṭhā Āsmān, Mūk Cīk, Parivār Ke Āṁsuoṁ Kā Sailāb — Phāṁs', *Hans*, November 2015, 89–92.

[1] See Sanjeev, 'Kitāb Ke Aṁś: Kisānoṁ Kī Jiṁdagī "phāṁs" Hai Ki "Phāṁsī" Hai?', Aajtak, 1 May 2015, https://aajtak.intoday.in/story/excerpts-from-sanjeev-novel-phans-published-by-vani-prakashan--1-810316.html.

[2] Vivek Mishra, 'Vyavasthā Ke Nām Likhā Gayā Kisānoṁ Kā Ek Sāmūhik Susāiḍ Noṭ', *Pakshghar* 9, no. 18 (2015): 270.

[3] See, for instance, Bihari, 'Pragati Ke Sarkārī Sūckāṁkoṁ Ke Viruddh'; Nawale, 'Rūṭhā Āsmān, Mūk Cīk, Parivār Ke Āṁsuoṁ Kā Sailāb — Phāṁs'; Mishra, 'Vyavasthā Ke Nām Likhā Gayā Kisānoṁ Kā Ek Sāmūhik Susāiḍ Noṭ'; Suraj Palival, 'Kisānoṁ Kī Gal—Phāṁs', *Pahal*, no. 105 (2016), http://pahalpatrika.com/frontcover/getstory/263; Rajshri Singh, 'Phāṁs: Upekśit Bhārtīya Kisān Kī Mūk Cīkh', *Jankriti Patrika* 2, no. 23 (March 2017),

mediated by perspective and other strategies of selection and presentation. The portrayal of reality in *Phāṁs*, I intend to show, should be understood by looking closely into the *form* of its storytelling.

A novel of 250-odd pages divided into 42 short chapters, *Phāṁs* has a fragmented structure, with the longest chapter spanning nearly 20 pages and the shortest one only 2. The first 30 chapters revolve around a number of suicide incidents, and the narrative focus jumps from one subplot to another. It is difficult to identify a main storyline or protagonists; the subplots lack continuity and natural transitions between incidents, evoking the narrative pattern of regionalist novels in the 1950s.[1] But unlike those regionalist novels that focused on the regional settings *per se*, the fragmentation in *Phāṁs*, I suggest, serves the purpose of the narrator, who demonstrates less interest in telling a linear story than in providing what I call a panoramic view of the ongoing crisis of farmers' suicide. But far from a neutral observer who simply documents what is happening in the region, the narrator is actively aligned with the suffering farmers, commenting and critiquing the suicide crisis.

Moreover, precisely because reality is essentially fragmented, the loosely linked subplots reject a homogenous interpretation of the crisis, which often tends to exclusively highlight economic reasons linked to agricultural decline. In the novel farmers are portrayed as suffering from a series of agrarian problems which include meagre farming incomes, widespread alcoholism, the burden of dowry, ineffective government and corruption, and public indifference, etc. As we shall see, the characters committing suicide in *Phāṁs* range from an activist who opposes suicides to a female farmer who is supporting her family; the causes of their tragedies are also

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http://jankritipatrika.in/read.php?artID=236; Nawale, *Kisān-Ātmhatyā: Yathārth Aur Vikalp (Phāṁs Upanyās Kā Sandarbh)*.

[1] Hansen, 'Phanishwarnath Renu', 8.

complex and mutually reinforcing, a mixture of personal failures to maintain selfhood in familial and social relationships and the historical conjuncture of economic and social change.

A comparison between *Phāṁs* and *Nero's Guests*, the 2009 documentary by Deepa Bhatia also focusing on the issue of farmers' suicides[1], I suggest, helps sharpen our understanding of the novel's narrative strategy and the role of the narrator. Although both *Phāṁs* and *Nero's Guests* take a similar perspective, i.e. of presenting the situation through an external observer, the narrator's role is slightly different.

With regards to strategies to address the agrarian crisis, *Phāṁs* takes a radical path. Far from being satisfied with simply documenting the cases and voicing a critique, the novel seeks to rectify the situation. Characters like Kala, Shakun, and Bijju overcome their grief after losing family members and become committed to fighting against agrarian distress. From chapter 31 onwards, a brainstorming discussion (*manthan*) is organised by the villagers, in which they and agricultural experts share thoughts to tackle the situation, vesting hope in self-help. In this way, *Phāṁs*, I suggest, self-consciously presents itself as proposing an analytical and effective social vision and displaying a proactive engagement, a form of direct participation in the debate on farmers' suicides.

The novel often fills the narrative with a high degree of factual density, a device that enhances the realistic effect and blurs the boundary between fiction and non-fiction. Such non-fictional elements, I argue, serve the political aim of bridging the gap between the audience and the narrative, and of convincing the reader that what they are reading is not "just" a novel and that the agrarian crisis truly exists and demands their empathy and solidarity. In addition to providing realist portrayals, real

[1] Deepa Bhatia, *Nero's Guests*, Documentary, 2009.

toponyms, I suggest, confirm the novel's regional specificity. Finally, the way language is employed is significant. Sanjeev faces the challenge to write about the Vidharbha region of Maharashtra and represent local traits of a non-Hindi region, while at the same time resonating with sensibilities of Hindi readers who might be unfamiliar with the setting. I suggest that the extensive use of words from the local language and English reflects the novel's attempt not only to maintain the regional flavour but also to indicate that rural culture is being reshaped by impacts from outside.

Given the theme of the novel intends to engage closely with the crisis, before developing my analysis, it is useful to briefly revisit the social science discourse on farmers' suicides and indebtedness, and then narrow my scope in order to address the situation in Vidarbha, Maharashtra, the geographical focus of the novel.

Farmers' Suicide, Financial Burdens and the Situation in Vidarbha

As an extreme expression of distress, despair but also discontent, suicide tends to spontaneously attract public concern, but at the same time it is widely understood to be only the tip of the iceberg of contemporary disarray in Indian agrarian society. Linking the spurt of farmers' suicides to the breaking of the rural social fabric evokes Durkheim's contention in his classic study of suicide,

> for each social group there is a specific tendency to suicide explained neither by the organic-psychic constitution of individuals nor the nature of the physical environment … it must necessarily depend upon social causes and be in itself a collective phenomenon.[1]

[1] Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. George Simpson (London: Routledge, 2002), 97.

Social scientific literature demonstrates with substantial quantitative evidence that suicide and indebtedness are positively correlated.[1] The stagnation of agriculture in the post-liberalisation era resulted in the sluggish growth of agricultural income. In the year 2002-03, a decade after the economic liberalisation, the average income of a cultivating family was less than eight rupees per capita per day.[2] Farmers' attempts to diversify sources of income are not feasible in many places; Maharashtra, for instance, is among those states where non-farm income constitutes a very minor share.[3] The issue of indebtedness sharpened when the governmental withdrew from agricultural provision due to its own financial constraints. The post-1990 era witnessed a steady deterioration of bank credit for agriculture, while the credit needs did not shrink.[4] A wide gap thus emerged between the demands of low-income farmers and what cooperatives and commercial banks could actually deliver. Farm households were thus compelled to resort to non-institutional sources. The share of informal rural credit—from private moneylenders with high interest rate—increased from 31 to 42 per cent between 1991 and 2003, exceeding the proportion of institutional credit and becoming the dominant source of credit.[5] As the interest burden mounted up, farmers tied to private loans got caught in a deadly debt trap. To repay the loans, "upwardly mobile farmers", as V.M. Rao calls them, tend to risk borrowing more money (usually mortgaging land) to invest in ventures with

[1] See Srijit Mishra, 'Agrarian Distress and Farmers' Suicides in Maharashtra', in *Agrarian Crisis in India*, ed. D. Narasimha Reddy and Srijit Mishra (Oxford University Press, 2010), 126–63; Jodhka, 'Beyond'crises''.
[2] Ramesh Chand, S. S. Raju, and L. M. Pandey, 'Growth Crisis in Agriculture: Severity and Options at National and State Levels', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2007, 2528–2533; Srijit Mishra, 'Risks, Farmers' Suicides and Agrarian Crisis in India: Is There a Way Out?', *Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research*, 2007.
[3] Lanjouw and Shariff, 'Rural Non-Farm Employment in India', 4443.
[4] S. L. Shetty, 'Agricultural Credit and Indebtedness: Ground Realities and Policy Perspectives', in *Agrarian Crisis in India*, ed. D. Narasimha Reddy and Srijit Mishra (Oxford University Press, 2010), 65.
[5] Shetty, 71.

potentially quick and high profits, which instead often produce heavy losses. Such a vicious circle exacerbates the original financial burden.[1]

Meanwhile, some scholars have also argued for a further scrutiny of the overarching economic cause. Nilotpal Kumar, for instance, in his recent study presents cases of farmers' suicides catalogued as "non-farming-related", registering a departure from previous literature that focused mainly on the economic factors.[2] Drawing upon Durkheim's classic perspective, Mohanty relates farmers' suicides to the loss of egoism and social disorientation.[3] However, non-economic causes are often inseparable from economic ones. The burden of dowry, for instance, a social institution categorised as non-economic, has a financial aspect when linked to non-institutional loans, making it inappropriate to simply categorise dowry-related suicides as "non-farming". The complexity behind farmers' suicides invites a closer scrutiny of its causes. My analysis of *Phāṁs* highlights how the narrative adopts a participating perspective and showcases the various dimensions of farmers' suicide through the delineation of various cases. But first let me zoom in to explain a little more the situation in the Vidharbha district of Maharashtra, where the novel is set.

Vidarbha has been seriously hit by the spiraling farmers' suicides since the 1990s and has the highest suicide rate in Maharashtra.[4] While conforming to the general picture of agrarian distress caused by stagnant growth in farming across the country, the situation of this region also registers its own traits. As the cotton belt of Maharashtra, farmers' suicides in Vidarbha are closely associated with cotton farming. The farmers committing suicide have been mostly cotton growers who

[1] See V. M. Rao, 'Farmers' Distress in a Modernizing Agriculture—The Tragedy of the Upwardly Mobile: An Overview', in *Agrarian Crisis in India*, ed. D. Narasimha Reddy and Srijit Mishra (Oxford University Press, 2010), 112.
[2] See Kumar, *Unraveling Farmer Suicides in India*, 180–81.
[3] See Mohanty, '"We Are Like the Living Dead"'; B. B. Mohanty, 'Farmer Suicides in India', *Economic and Political Weekly* 48, no. 21 (2013): 45–54.
[4] P. B. Behere and A. P. Behere, 'Farmers' Suicide in Vidarbha Region of Maharashtra State: A Myth or Reality?', *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* 50, no. 2 (2008): 124–27; Mishra, 'Agrarian Distress and Farmers' Suicides in Maharashtra'.

devoted the majority of their crop area to this commodity.[1] Cotton farmers in Vidarbha have suffered from severe economic setbacks. The state registered the lowest yield among all major cotton growing states in the early 2000s.[2] The vagaries of the monsoon in the period also contributed to yield reduction, since most of the fields are not irrigated.[3] The cost of cotton cultivation remained high, and this contributed to the stagnation of yield; during the period 2000-01 and 2002-03, the costs in Maharashtra were the highest among all states.[4] Stunted by escalating costs, the revenue of cotton was also curbed by the international competition, especially from cheap US cotton, and no effective scheme was implemented to shield vulnerable cultivators from price volatility.[5] With the poor performance of cotton, the income of farming families ceased to grow, and they tended to be dragged into a debt trap similar to the rest of India.[6] Although the government intervened in the situation through a loan relief package in 2008, the number of suicides did not fall sharp after the implementation, indicating that the waiver had very limited effects in tackling the problem.[7]

Sanjeev's novel is deeply informed by the media reports and social science scholarship on the topic. Its characters quote statistics, the *manthan* represents a range of opinions, but the novel, as I will show, is more than a novelisation of the crisis. In the next section, I provide a brief introduction to the writer Sanjeev and summarise the plot of the novel.

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[1] Mohanty, '"We Are Like the Living Dead"', 253.
[2] Srijit Mishra, 'Farmers' Suicides in Maharashtra', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2006, 1538–1545; Siddhartha Mitra and Sangeeta Shroff, 'Farmers' Suicides in Maharashtra', *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 49 (2007): 73–77.
[3] See Mishra, 'Agrarian Distress and Farmers' Suicides in Maharashtra', 132–33.
[4] Mitra and Shroff, 'Farmers' Suicides in Maharashtra'.
[5] Mishra, 'Farmers' Suicides in Maharashtra'; Mishra, 'Agrarian Distress and Farmers' Suicides in Maharashtra'.
[6] Mohanty, '"We Are Like the Living Dead"', 256.
[7] See P. Sainath, 'Farm Suicides: A 12-Year Saga', *The Hindu*, 25 January 2010, http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/Farm-suicides-a-12-year-saga/article15968088.ece\.

Sanjeev and *Phāṁs*

Starting his writing career in the late 1970s, Sanjeev (b. 1947) has been active in the Hindi literary arena for more than thirty years. *Phāṁs*, his most recent novel, was published in 2015. Like most Hindi writers writing on the rural world, Sanjeev was also born and raised in a small village in Sultanpur District of Uttar Pradesh. Due to the terrible financial situation of his household, the writer has concrete and bitter memories of the hardship of village life. The experience of feudalism and poverty in his own village was later transformed into his first novel, *Kiśangaṛh ke Aherī* (*The Hunters of Kishangarh*, 1981), in which he focused on the exploitation experienced by small farmers.[1] After moving with his family to Kolti, a small town in West Bengal, Sanjeev joined the local iron and steel company as an assistant chemist and dreamt of becoming a scientist. In order to maintain his family, the writer had to do a variety of part-time jobs, ranging from business agent to private tutor.[2] In the light of Sanjeev's life experience, Rajni Tyagi argues that the experiences of feudalism in his childhood and later the unpleasant confrontation with capitalism during his job at the steel company have helped shape his ideology, which is characterised by a clear-cut opposition to feudalism and capitalism.[3] The Naxalist movement also had an impact on him as a leftist writer.[4] These convictions of resistance permeate his writings, including *Phāṁs*. Although the themes in Sanjeev's writing are highly diverse—ranging from the women's struggles to Adivasi rebellions[5]—the ideological core that challenges oppression, injustice and social

[1] Santosh Raghunathrav Raybole, 'Sañjīv ke Kathā Sāhitya meṁ Sarvhārā Samāj Jivan kā Citraṇ' (PhD, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, 2012), 154.
[2] Raybole, 156–57.
[3] Rajni Tyagi, 'Sāhitya kā Samājśāstr aur Sañjīv ke Upanyās' (PhD, Chaudhary Charan Singh University, 2011), 11.
[4] Tyagi, 16–17.
[5] Shahajahan Maner, *Sāmājik Yathārth Aur Kathākār Sañjīv* (Jaipur: Shruti Prakashan, 2009), 11.

inequality is manifest in every form of his literary production. Sanjeev's own life journey probably enables him to express empathy for and relate himself to the small characters which always feature in his writings.

A prolific writer, Sanjeev has more than 150 short stories and 12 novels to his credit over nearly forty years of creative journey, as well as several plays and works of children's literature. This oeuvre has entrenched the status of the writer as a vigorous voice in contemporary Hindi literature. New short stories by him continue to come out in the most recent mainstream Hindi literary magazines. His previous works have won him various literary awards on both national and international level, and a number of short stories and novels have been introduced to the curricula of universities.[1] Between 2003 and 2010, working closely with Rajendra Yadav, Sanjeev served as executive editor of the prestigious literary magazine *Hans*. As a writer who mainly focuses on the socially marginalised, Sanjeev still remains at the centre of Hindi literary discourse; his achievement and position also testify that village writing has remained a significant part of the Hindi literary world. For him, literary creation does not derive from convenience but from the "flame of the heart" and from narrating personal experience.[2]

Sanjeev's works are invariably about subjects and events in specific regions. Pushing the boundary of Hindi regionalist writing, Sanjeev does not refrain from exploring regions that are not familiar to him, unlike Renu's regionalist paradigm which would limit writers to writing about their own "comfort zone". Describing him as a "whole-timer of grass-root writing", critic Kailash Banvasi suggests that Sanjeev sheds light on regions and areas that have never been touched in Hindi literature.[3] The aim to discover and show little known areas to Hindi readers is a

[1] The information is derived from the introduction to the author on the jacket of *Phāṁs*. See Sanjeev, *Phāṁs* (New Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 2015).
[2] Sanjeev, 'Bhūmikā', in *Āp Yahāṁ Haiṁ* (Delhi: Akshar Prakashan, 1984).
[3] See Maner, *Sāmājik Yathārth Aur Kathākār Sañjīv*, 16.

powerful one for Sanjeev, and exploring unfamiliar fields with dedication excites his literary creativity. Similar to the method of social scientists, participant observation and research are the source of his creativity. Before writing *Sāvadhān! Nīce Āg Hai* (*Watchout! Fire down there*, 1986), a novel based on a colliery disaster in the Jharia region of Jharkhand, the writer went up and down the coal mine for months.[1] It also took Sanjeev twelve years to research the dacoits residing at the border area between Nepal and Bihar before he started writing *Jaṅgal Jahāṁ Śurū Hotā Hai* (*Where the Forest Begins*, 2000).[2] *Phāṁs* is the outcome of one such extensive field investigation and research, but also marks a new phase in the writer's literary career because, for the first time, it extends regionalism to a non-Hindi-speaking region. The idea of this novel started to materialise between 2010 and 2011, when he was invited as a guest writer by Mahatma Gandhi International Hindi University, Wardha, where he was able to witness and investigate the situations of local farmers in Vidarbha.[3]

Although *Phāṁs* pertains to a particular region, the scope of this novel touches upon many different aspects and problems—familial, economic and social—of rural life. Let me begin with a synopsis of the plot, which illustrates the multifaceted manifestations of agrarian distress and will help navigate my analysis in the following sections. As the novel has a fragmented structure, as I already mentioned, I tease out here the major events in the narrative. The novel opens with the subplot of a Dalit cultivating household consisting of Shibu and Shakun and their two daughters, Sarasvati and Kala, who have both reached marriageable age and have become a big concern for their parents given their poor financial condition. Kala, the younger daughter, who is willful and full of spirit of exploration,

[1] Sanjeev, *Sāvadhān! Nīce Āg Hai* (Delhi: Radhakrishna Prakashan, 1986).
[2] Maner, *Sāmājik Yathārth Aur Kathākār Sañjīv*, 12; Sanjeev, *Jaṅgal Jahāṁ Śurū Hotā Hai* (Delhi: Radhakrishna Prakashan, 2000).
[3] See the acknowledgement Sanjeev, *Phāṁs*, 8.

particularly worries Shibu, the father, because of her ambiguous relationship with Ashok, a Maratha boy of a different caste. Shibu interrupts their schooling and plans to marry them off, but a series of poor harvests land them in a disastrous debt trap. Hoping for a change in her fate and freedom from caste exploitation, Shakun converts to Buddhism, whereas Shibu remains unconvinced about converting. After the couple manage to pay off their debts with great difficulties, the problem of the daughters' marriages looms large. Their land, the only property they can offer as marriage settlement, fails to interest any potential grooms. When the sowing season arrives, the family become indebted again in need of new seeds, but torrential downpour ruins their effort. One day, catching sight of Kala bringing back an orphan whose father has recently committed suicide, the village priest begins to spread the rumour that the baby is a secret child of Kala and Ashok, and the villagers go along with the rumour despite knowing the truth. Under both social and financial pressure, Shibu ends his life in a well.

Intercutting the story of Shibu's family are many subplots with other characters. For instance, Sunil is a courageous and assertive leader of local farmers who constantly warns people of the debt trap and offers financial help, including to Shibu's family. He encourages everyone to raise a new breed of cow, whose milk however turns out to be unsalable leaving an onerous burden for the farmers following his suggestion. Distressed by his own mistake, Sunil turns from fighter against suicide to a suicide victim himself.

Mohan, a former-activist-turned-victim of the agricultural crisis, is left behind with his wife and an old bull, which he calls "*bhai*" (brother), after selling the land for his sons to move to the city. Mohan's constant chattering to the "*bhai*", which we may take as a sign of distress, deeply worries his wife. One day, Mohan reluctantly decides to sell "*bhai*" for its own sake, since he can no longer afford to

keep it. The purchaser, who gives the best offer while concealing his occupation, turns out to be a butcher, and Mohan is accused of having committed the unpardonable sin of "cow slaughter". He is then instructed by a Brahmin to beg like a bull with a lasso around his neck in order to atone for this immoral act.

The story of Asha, a friend of Shakun's, also cuts in halfway through the novel. A thrifty and hard-working woman, Asha has cultivated assiduously to support her family, whereas her husband Suresh is an alcoholic. Serial blows of flood and draught force Asha to borrow heavily, while local agricultural officials are unconcerned about their predicament. One day, Suresh is supposed to sell the cotton in the market but is disappointed by the extremely low rate offered and decides to return home. He falls asleep after consuming alcohol, leaving the cotton unattended in the open air. A sudden rainstorm at night ruins all the cotton as well as Asha's hopes, and she commits suicide.

After these incidents, in the second half, the narrative goes on to tell the story of rectification, seeking a path to bring the distressed farmers and the ailing agriculture out of the mire of self-destruction. Asha's death strengthens Shakun's stand, who engages with the local liquor ban movement that helps women like Asha affected by their husbands' alcoholism. Kala devotes herself to a campaign of land purification to curb the excessive use of fertilisers. Sunil's son Bijju, a young researcher focusing on farmer suicides in Vidarbha, sets up a brainstorming meeting, in which agriculture specialists and ordinary farmers assemble to address various agrarian problems in this region. They criticise the government for demonstrating little concern towards vulnerable farmers, foreign companies that plunder and loot cotton growers, as well as the widespread alcoholism and superstition that aggravate the crisis. The novel ends by introducing the self-ruled and self-sufficient village of Menda Lekha, where forest rights belong only to the villagers free from any state

interruption, a model that is believed to alleviate the agrarian crisis. Let us now look at how the novel achieves it narrative aim of presenting a realist representation of the crisis.

Representing Reality and Narrative Form

Like other works of Sanjeev, *Phāṁs* is a novel based on the writer's field research in Vidarbha, where he spent two years with local farmers and studying the agrarian crisis. The novel thus stems from the writer's own observation of various individuals and their stories—modified and transformed into the subplots. The omniscient narrator, who seems to occupy a position similar to that of writer himself, guides the reader on a journey through different stories and events. All the subplots indicate that the farmers have suffered familial, social and economic pressures before they are pushed to a situation where suicide seems the only option. On top of this extra-diegetic narrator, the novel introduces the character of Bijju, Sunil's son, after his father's death. Sunil, a young researcher who is tasked to write a report on the issue of farmers' suicides, travels across the region, and performs exactly the same role as the narrator. The doubling of the narrator's function reinforces the impression that the whole novel is organised in the form of a "report". As the narrative pushes ahead, Bijju begins to merge with the narrator's voice to such an extent that it becomes hard to differentiate whether the account is given by the narrator or derived from Bijju's report. This blurring of boundaries between the narrator and Bijju does not seem to bother the author, since their perspective, characterised by eagerness to understand the agrarian crisis and the desire to empathise with the vulnerable farmers, remains consistent.

Thus, the question of authenticity concerns not only the realistic representation of the material, social and emotional conditions of farmers' lives[1], but also the perspective of representation, pointing to the political function of the narrative. Far from offering a neutral point of view that documents the events and incidents objectively, the narrator, I suggest, empathises strongly with the farmers and demands that the readers align themselves with this position, leaving no room for ambiguity in the reader's response. This pro-farmer stance is achieved through two strategies. First, there is an obvious polarisation between ordinary farmers, portrayed as vulnerable and disadvantaged, and what I call "anti-farmer" forces, including banks, foreign companies and the government, which are characterised as villainous and exploitative guilty parties, and are directly blamed for the farmers' situation. Descriptions of the forces come in the form of explanatory notes alongside the storytelling, which contribute to the engagement of the narrative with the extra-diegetic reality and the domain of news and social science research. For instance, banks have raised the threshold of agricultural loans, forcing farmers to borrow heavily from private moneylenders; governmental loan relief schemes, a gesture for soliciting votes, hence become palliative and irrelevant.

> *Ṭhīk 2009 ke cunāv se pahle 72 hajār karoṛ rupye kī karj maphī kī ghoṣṇā huī. Yānī jo karj liye the, vo māf. Lekin kuch gāṁv valoṁ kā muṁh laṭak gayā. Sarkār ke hisāb se karj vahī thā jo sarkārī baiṇkoṁ se liyā gayā thā … zyādātar logoṁ ne to gāṁv ke sūdkhoroṁ se karj liyā hai. Unkā khūn sāhūkār cūstā rahē aur 72 hajār karoṛ kā āṁkaṛā sarkārī dān ke rūp meṁ cāpkar sarkār apnī pīṭh thapthapātī rahe.* (66-67)
>
> Just before the 2009 election a 720 billion rupees loan waiver was announced, which meant to contain everything. But many villagers were still in grief. The government thought the loans included only money borrowed from banks. But the majority of the villagers were indebted to private moneylenders. They were the

[1] Auerbach in *Mimesis* argues that the significance literary realism lies in the "serious treatment of everyday reality…and the rise of more extensive and socially inferior human groups to the position of 'subject matter'", Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 491.

> bloodsuckers and the government were satisfied with their donation of the 720 billion.

In addition, cheaper imported genetically modified seeds increase the expenditure of fertiliser and pesticide, which forms a vicious circle that threatens to eventually ruin cultivation. One of the striking examples provided of this critique is when the narrator points out that suicide cases of farmers are compartmentalised mechanically and ruthlessly by the government into *pātr* (eligible) and *apātr* (ineligible): only deaths from indebtedness are regarded as *pātr* and are thus eligible for governmental compensation. Shibu's death is adjudged as *apātr* because he was no longer in debt when he committed suicide, despite the fact that he and Shakun had just managed to pay off the debts with great difficulty. This stirs up irritation and outrage among the farmers; an unnamed farmer expresses himself ironically in the following terms:

> *Sarkār kripayā ham kisānoṁ ko yah batāye ki ātmhatyā karte vakt kin-kin bātoṁ kā khyāl rakhā jāe—kab aur kaise kī jatī hai ātmhatyā? Kis paṇḍit se pūchkar…? Yah bhī sikhāyā jāe ki kaise likhī jātī hai suisāiḍal noṭ!* (116)
>
> Government please specify what farmers need to keep in mind when committing suicide—when and how to do it? Which pandit should we ask…? Also teach us how to write the suicide note!

On top of lambasting ironically the merciless anti-farmer forces, the narrator's pro-farmer stance also manifests itself in the careful delineations of the subjective sensitivities of the ordinary farmers and their emotional concerns over land, livestock and livelihood. These are melodramatic moments that aim to reveal the characters' interior worlds and ask the reader to "endure the extremes of pain and anguish", as Peter Brooks puts it.[1] The moral imagination of the reader is easily stirred by these depictions of stark emotional struggle and helplessness. In a scene in

[1] See Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (Yale University Press, 1976), 35.

which Shibu remembers how six years earlier the entire family had tried to save their dying bullock named Lalu, the narrative offers this vivid flashback of their attempts to rouse the bullock:

> *"Uṭh! uṭh jā mere bābā! Haṭ haṭ! ṭṭ! ṭṭ" tamām lalkāreṁ bekār gayiṁ. Nauvārī meṁ lathpath śakun dauṛī-dauṛī āyī. Bastā meṁṛ par rakhkar dauṛī āyī mulgiyāṁ bhī. Pūrā parivār lag gayā lālū ko khaṛā karne meṁ ... "Uṭh jā bhaiyā! Uṭh jā dādā! Uṭh jā lālū!" Magar nahiṁ, lālū ne do-ek bār uṭhne kī kośiś bhī kī magar na uṭh sakā.* (16)
>
> "Stand up! Stand up, baba! Move move!" All provocations were in vain. Shakun were running in the nauvari. The daughters also ran in, dropping their schoolbags on the field border. The entire family got involved in the task of making Lalu stand up … "Stand up, brother! Stand up, grandpa! Lalu, stand up!" But no, Lalu made a few attemps to stand up but failed.

In this quote, our attention is drawn to the forms of address employed for the bullock Lalu—"*bhaī*", "*dādā*" and "*bābā*". Through these words, Lalu is personified, more a family member than a farm animal. Similarly, Mohan's relationship towards his "*bhai*" can also be understood in these terms. It is an intensely sentimental and dramatised moment characterised by the repetitive use of imperatives in the direct speech, as if the reader were witnessing the unsuccessful efforts of the family and sharing their feelings. What the narrative highlights here is the emotional connection between the farmers' family and their means of production, a close bond that impresses the reader greatly. The narrator recounts well the deep connection of the farmers with the land, and how they are inseparable from their livelihood. Hence the epigraph to this chapter, derived from the comment by Kala to her father: "*Śetī koī dhandhā nahiṁ, balki ek laif sṭāil hai, jīne ka tarīka, jise kisān anya kisi dhandhe ke*

calte nahiṁ choṛ saktā." ("Farming is not an occupation, but a lifestyle, a way of living. Farmers cannot give it up for any other profession", 17).[1]

One of the distinctive characteristics of *Phāṁs*, I have already pointed out a few times, is its fragmented narrative structure. Unlike other village texts examined in this thesis, the novel does not have a main storyline, and instead, as the synopsis has shown, comprises parallel subplots recounting a collection of stories about agrarian distress. The omniscient narrator exerts absolute control over the allocation of narrative space, making, for instance, the story of Shibu's family comparatively more developed and running over several chapters, whereas Sunil's subplot occupies only one single chapter. The narrative jumps back and forth between the parallel subplots, resulting in a "rambling" narrative. For example, after it begins with Shibu's family, the narrative focus shifts unexpectedly to Mohan's tragedy in chapter 4, and then moves back later to the Shibu's family in chapter 7.

Far from a sign of disorganisation that impairs the novel's aesthetics, as some Hindi critics have argued[2], I contend that this fragmented narrative structure should be seen as a conscious strategy that contributes significantly to the representation of reality. Since *Phāṁs* expresses a strong commitment to revealing the conditions of the agrarian predicament as they are, multiple subplots aim to demonstrate the complexity and heterogeneity of this crisis and thereby avoid the impression that indebtedness is the single dominant cause. Moreover, the juxtaposition of these subplots provides a holistic approach to the situation of farmers' suicides in Vidarbha. The narrator is consciously selective about the victims: Shibu, a Dalit father concerned about his daughters' marriages; Sunil, himself an opponent of suicides; Mohan, ostracised by the community; and Asha, the strong wife of an

[1] *Śetī* is the Marathi equivalent of *Khetī* in Hindi for cultivation. I will discuss the issue of register later in this chapter.
[2] See Bihari, 'Pragati Ke Sarkārī Sūckāṁkoṁ Ke Viruddh', 89; Singh, 'Phāṁs: Upekśit Bhārtīya Kisān Kī Mūk Cīkh'.

alcoholic. These characters come from varied social backgrounds and have very different stories but similar tragic endings. The shifting narrative focus, I argue, seeks to resonate with the fragmented and non-linear realities. Precisely because these incidents are unlikely to take place in a linear sequence or directly relate to each other, the fragmented structure enhances the impression of an explosion of such incidents.

The narrative form of *Phāṁs* evokes that of *Nero's Guests*, the documentary about the theme of farmers' suicides already discussed above. Yet while both share the same agenda of exploring the realities behind the suicides, there are differences regarding their narrative strategies, and a comparison between the two helps us understand how *Phāṁs* organises its narrative as well as its effects. Unlike *Phāṁs*, where focalisation shifts with each subplot, *Nero's Guests* mostly is focalised through P. Sainath, the journalist. It begins with a scene in which Sainath is giving a speech on the agrarian crisis, referring allegorically to Nero, the Roman emperor who ordered to burn prisoners and poor people so as to illuminate a lavish evening party for his guests. The setting then shifts to a village, with the camera following the journalist who comes to visit some farmers, talk to them, and take note of their incidents. Without an off-screen voice, Sainath performs the narrator's role in the documentary, a role that the narrator and Bijju perform in *Phāṁs*. The viewers see what Sainath sees, and are provided with his comments and ideas. For instance, after an interview with a bereaved woman, he speaks to the camera:

> "After doing this for years, you know that she is also planning to take her life. There is not a thing you can offer her by way of genuine solace or comfort. It's when you feel completely humiliated and you also feel that anger … here, the fastest growing media in the world, a politically free media, but imprisoned by profit."[1]

[1] Bhatia, *Nero's Guests*.

Just as *Phāṁs* contains multiple subplots, *Nero's Guests* also contains different stories of suicides. But whereas *Phāṁs* lays great stress on the narrative development of the subplots, *Nero's Guests* does not go into detail. Because of the length limit of 56 minutes, the documentary presents instead either Sainath listening to local farmers talking about their grief, or the journalist himself telling tragic stories to the camera. Instead of foregrounding emotional and melodramatic moments as in *Phāṁs*, *Nero's Guests* restricts such portrayals of emotional outpourings. For instance, while a young woman talks of her late father, a farmer and poet, and reads one of his poems, the camera moves around capturing the reactions of people sitting nearby, including her mother, younger sister and Sainath himself. Free from emotional outburst, the sorrow is manifest through their facial expressions and gestures. The mother looks pensive, moving her eyes to avoid direct contact with the camera; the younger sister twists her fingers with a heavy heart; Sainath listens as he sighs, and touches his jaw unconsciously.[1] Their wordless responses, in contrast to the unambiguous and forthright outpouring in *Phāṁs*, I suggest, do not seek to dictate viewers' emotional responses in an explicit way and leave them freedom to reflect upon the sentiment by themselves.

Such difference in representation of moments of intense emotion can be seen through another example. As a novel on farmers' suicides, death itself plays a significant role in *Phāṁs* and reinforces the sense of realism. The narrator does not hold back from talking about death and portrays the scenes of death so vividly in a realistic manner that they generate striking visual effects, as if the moments were unfolding in front of the reader's eyes. These scenes can be compared to "close-ups" in films, where the narrative time stops, and the spectator is caught up and absorbed

[1] The scene starts from 8:45 in the documentary.

in a sensational visual moment which the lens—here the narrator—highlights and treats very seriously. This is for example the description of Sunil's death:

> *Eṇḍo salphān pīkar prāyaścitt kartā-sā sunīl. Ab kyā socnā aur kyā samajhnā. Lo, asar śurú ho gayā. Bedhne lagā jahar. Peṭ meṁ bhiṣaṇ maroṛ…jabardast aiṁṭhan, khiṁce cale ā rahe haiṁ prāṇ. Muṁh se jhāg. Khiṁce cale ā rahe haiṁ snāyu! Kāṭh ke beṁc se nīce luṛhak gayā jaise ādmī nahiṁ vah bhī kāṭh kā kundā ho.* (72)
>
> Sunil, as if atoning by drinking Endosulfan. Nothing left to think or understand. Look, the effect is beginning to show. The toxin begins to penetrate. Dreadful twists in the stomach…powerful wrenches, breathing beginning to stop. Foam in the mouth. Tendons stretching. He rolled down from the wooden bench as if he is not a person, just a log.

The quote focalises on the body recording the changes under the effects of the pesticide—the organs are gradually poisoned, and the lively man finally becomes as stiff as a log. Forming a startling contrast with Sunil's previous heroic image as a leading figure against indebtedness and suicide, the disturbing and vivid close-up portrayal, I argue, draws the reader's attention and arouses empathy. The realistic approach to the representation of his death amplifies its striking effect.

Shying away from the direct portrayal of death, instead, *Nero's Guests* employs a similar "freeze-frame" on the bereaved. Unlike in the novel, the main purpose here is not to achieve a realistic representation, but to employ an expressive device that reveals the emotions and the character's psychology, a primary function of freeze-frames.[1] In a scene where the lens rests upon the photo of a boy in a baggy white shirt and an old woman leaning on the wall sitting abreast, Sainath's off-screen voice describes it in the following terms:

> "Just those eyes, again, wearing his father's clothes who committed suicide. I am tired of telling you the reasons. You can see in his eyes that he is really scared. He's been pitchforked into a

[1] See J. Dudley Andrew, *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 1976), 100.

> position of responsibility he's not ready for. Look at his mother sitting next to him. Just look at what her body language tells you. I remember this boy's eyes, every time, every time I remember his eyes. I see a kid who is trying to be a man whose eyes show you how scared he is."[1]

Again, compared to the forceful "close-up" shot on a Sunil's body in *Phāṁs*, the documentary chooses a scene of less intense visual impact and focuses on generating nuanced emotional response. The freeze-frame on the photo for more than one minute encourages the viewer to look closely at the picture and contemplate it. Sainath's commentary explains the reason of this shot, helps achieve the emotion-generating effect, and minimises any possible ambiguity that the simple freeze-frame may create.

Apart from telling the stories of how suicides happen and their aftermaths, both *Nero's Guests* and *Phāṁs* also offer critiques of the agrarian crisis. The second half of documentary is organised around fragments of Sainath's speeches that explain the vulnerability of Indian farmers. In one talk feature, for instance, the journalist criticises the predatory commercialisation of the countryside, which results in the biggest displacement in Indian history. In another, he takes aim at agricultural subsidies in developed countries that are destroying farming in India. The documentary ends with the continuation of the same lecture of the opening scene, in which Sainath urges the audience not to be "Nero's Guests", numbed and indifferent to the ongoing farmers' suicides in the countryside. *Phāṁs* dedicates chapter 16 to the analysis of the agrarian crisis, and its critique takes the form of Bijju's report—it is here that the narrator's voice merges with Bijju's. In this way, the narrator transforms himself from an observer to a thinker and participant. Like Sainath, Bijju also highlights the vulnerable position of farmers in face of corporate capital, which

[1] See Bhatia, *Nero's Guests*.

deprives them of control over the market. Farmers are generally indebted due to high cost in cultivation and daily expense, a vicious circle further exacerbated by the lack of support from the government:

> *Mahamge bījoṁ, khādoṁ aur kīṭnāśakoṁ kī vajah se jyādātar kisānoṁ ko karj lenā paṛtā hai… udārīkaraṇ ke calte sarkār kā ravaiyā hī kārporeṭ ho cukā hai…baṛī pūṁjī bājār meṁ lābh kamāne ke uddeśy se ātī haiṁ…ibtdā hī galat thī ki htyāre samay meṁ bīṭī bīj ke bīj paṛe haiṁ. Bājār ke bāhrī dabāv ne iskī is pāramparik kuśaltā kā to daman kiyā hī, sāth hī kisānoṁ ko parāśrit, vikalphīn banā diyā.* (108-9)
>
> Most farmers are forced to borrow thanks to costly seeds, fertilisers and pesticides … The government's attitude has leaned towards corporates since the economic liberalisation … The capital enters the market only for profits … The mistake begins with the BT seeds. External pressures of the market suppress traditional skills and farmers become dependent and deprived of options.

Serving as a review based on the tragedies elucidated previously, this critique, I suggest, diverges from the storytelling mode of narrative, pushing the novel's formal boundary by adding analytical discourses to it.

As already mentioned, unlike the documentary the novel takes a more radical approach in the effort to generate substantial change. From chapter 30 onwards, the narrative turns to a self-organised brainstorm meeting (*manthan*), in which farmers, including characters who appeared previously such as Bijju, Kala and Shakun, and agricultural experts from across Vidarbha and beyond get together to discuss the suicide issue and the future of Indian agriculture. In the beginning of the meeting, one unnamed farmer, for instance, spells out his reasoning behind the deaths of farmers:

> *"Ātmhatyā kaun kartā hai—ve, jinkī mahattvākāṁkṣāeṁ haiṁ … yah mahattvākāṁkṣāeṁ galat hai kyā? Śetī choṛkar unke pās kuch bhī nahiṁ. Is śetī meṁ ucit se ucit adhik upārjan karne ke lie, mahaṁge unnat bīj, mahaṁgī khād, mahaṁgī siṁcāī, mahaṁge kīṭnāśak … paise nahiṁ haiṁ. Karj lo. Nahiṁ miltā, 10 pratiśat byāj par lo. Yānī sampannoṁ kī pratispardhā meṁ khaṛe hone kī*

> *lālac meṁ karj ke daldal meṁ ḍūb jāte haiṁ aaur ek din mar jāte haiṁ."* (186)
>
> "Who commits suicide—those who are ambitious … But what is wrong with the ambitions? They have nothing but farming. To earn more in farming, they need pricey seeds, pricey fertilisers, pricey irrigation, pricey pesticides … but no money. Then take loan, which they do not get. Then they take usury at 10 percent interest rates. That is to say, in order to join in the contest of becoming rich, they become trapped in the swamp of debt and one day they die."

People also debate about very detailed technical issues, including "zero-budget farming" (190) and "well irrigation" (192). Although some of the issues raised in this meeting, such as the excessive dependence on foreign seeds and alcoholism, overlap with the previous subplots, this meeting, I argue, brings this novel to a new realm. Dissatisfied with simply reporting and reflecting upon the suicide problem, it strives to offer solutions. Finally, chapter 40 depicts a self-sufficient and self-ruled village called Menda Lekha as a model village to show how the ongoing agrarian crisis can be tackled.[1] It is actually a real village in Maharashtra where the villagers have full rights to administer themselves and deploy the natural resources.[2] The self-ruled model village adumbrates Sanjeev's political stance, i.e. that the farmers should take the initiative to fully control their circumstances, and that it is entirely possible to save the rural world from the crisis. In this way, *Phāṁs* presents itself self-consciously as not only a story but as providing an analytical and effective social vision, and displaying an engaged and active attitude of participating into the discourse of farmers' suicides. In other words, *Phāṁs* represents a new kind of activist fiction in Hindi.

[1] Sanjeev, *Phāṁs*, 234–41.
[2] The story of the Menda Lekha village is also available here: 'Menda Lekha- A Tribal Village for the People and Owned by the People', accessed 8 July 2017, https://www.facebook.com/notes/ashish-shalini-shrivastava/menda-lekha-a-tribal-village-for-the-people-and-owned-by-the-people/10151795679321347/.

As already mentioned, in a more direct engagement with reality than that of other fictional works, the narrator does not refrain from interspersing the narrative with abundant non-fictional elements, a device that blurs the boundary between fiction and non-fiction. As such *Phāṁs* can be viewed as close to a nonfictional novel, a loosely defined genre between novel and narrative journalism, characterised by depictions of actual events woven together with fictitious conversations and using the storytelling techniques.[1] I suggest that Sanjeev deliberately chooses this formula because of the novel's thematic gravity and the urgency to convince the reader of the seriousness of farmers' suicides and agrarian crisis. For instance, rather than fictional places, the writer deliberately employs real Vidarbha toponyms, a device that evokes *Almā Kabūtarī*, including Bangaon, Yavatmal, Wardha, Nagpur, Gadchiroli, Pavnar and Amala. In the fictional narrative, I suggest, these real toponyms draw a map of the ongoing agrarian crisis in the region, while at the same time constantly remind the reader that the rural world represented in the novel is not merely a fictional space and suggest that the incidents associated with the fictional characters actually happen in the same world the readers live in. The distance between the characters and readers is therefore significantly reduced, facilitating the process of producing empathy and arousing solidarity towards those farmers.

Phāṁs pushes the boundaries of the novel's form also through the assimilation of non-fictional tales and accounts, which are positioned in parallel with the subplots. Chapter 11, for instance, moves from the aftermath of Sunil's death to the real story of a farmer named Dada Khobragade, the creator of a high-yield paddy

[1]. See John Hollowell, *Fact & Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel* (University of North Carolina Press, 1977). Drawing upon a proliferation of Indian English journalistic texts, such as Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City* (2005) and Gyan Prakash's *Mumbai Fables* (2010),William Dalrymple also identifies a "new wave of India's non-fiction". See William Dalrymple, 'Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Slum by Katherine Boo – Review', *The Observer*, 22 June 2012, sec. Books, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jun/22/beautiful-forevers-katherine-boo-review. See Suketu Mehta, *Maximum City: Bombay Lost & Found* (Penguin Random House India Private Limited, 2017); Gyan Prakash, *Mumbai Fables* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

variety. It recounts the story of how this new variety was invented as well as how the fruit of this ordinary farmer was ruthlessly stolen by a local research institute, landing his life in great difficulty. The narrator recognises Khobragade as "a torch burning in the darkness" (*aṁdheroṁ meṁ ek maśāl kī tarah jal rahe haiṁ*, 85), who does not choose to take his life despite the misfortunes, in contrast to the people who have committed suicides under pressure. What is intriguing is that the account of Khobragade draws upon his own life experience reported in local media without modifying a single detail.[1] Since Khobragade's real story is juxtaposed with other subplots, does it also mean that the stories of Shibu, Sunil, Mohan, Asha can be read as having been all inspired from or, in extreme terms, simply retelling real incidents? In the very least, injecting non-fictional accounts reinforces the impression that the novel is documenting the eyewitness realities of farmers' hardship in the region.

Regionalism in *Phāṁs*

In this section, I focus on how Sanjeev employs elements of the Hindi regionalist paradigm to help achieve reality effects, while at the same time present local cultural elements to readers unfamiliar with the region. Like many other works of Sanjeev, *Phāṁs* is based on the writer's own field research and investigation. As the region of Vidarbha, Maharashtra is foregrounded in the novel, the narrative evokes the narrative model of Hindi regionalist writing introduced by Renu. Renu extensively used oral structures, namely folk songs and tales, to challenge the traditional form of the village novel established by Premchand and at the same time enhance a sense of local colour.[2] In *Phāṁs*, Sanjeev also introduces cultural forms

[1] The story of Khobragade and HMT rice is available here: 'HMT - Paddy Variety | National Innovation Foundation-India', accessed 7 July 2017, http://nif.org.in/innovation/hmt--an_improved_paddy_variety/286.
[2] See Hansen, 'Phanishwarnath Renu', 157; Jha, 'Visualising a Region'.

that belong to the specific region, adding local flavour to the narrative. One example is the depiction of the Pola festival celebrated by local farmers together with their farm cattle:

> *Uf! Yah bāriś bhī na! calo, polā ke din to aksar pānī barstā hī hai. Phir sabhī apne-apne bailoṁ ko nahlāne-dhulāne sajāne-saṁvārne meṁ lage hoṁge … Gāṁv ke bail sajā-dhajā kar khaṛe haiṁ kisān. Amarāvatī kī māmī ne to bākāyadā ek kaśīde vālī cādar hī oṛhā rakhī hai. Jhālar-vālar, mukuṭ, ghuṁghrū, ghṇṭī, ūpar se sīṁgeṁ tak maṛh dī haiṁ camacamiyā kāgaj se.* (168-169)
>
> Uf! It is raining again. It always rains on the day of the Pola festival. Still people are busy cleaning and decorating their cattle … Farmers are decorating bulls in the village. Mami from Amaravati regularly covers her cattle with an embroidered cloth. Fringe, tiara and small bell, shiny paper has covered from the top to the horn.

In fact, as I have noted earlier, the writer tends to push the boundary of Hindi regionalism and touches upon localities that have rarely been registered in Hindi literature. In *Phāṁs* particularly, Sanjeev for the first time extends his creative realm to a non-Hindi-speaking setting. This is a brave, if not unprecedented, step in Hindi literature, but simultaneously the novel faces the challenge of dealing with localness, especially the local language.[1] Sanjeev does not take the same path as Renu, i.e. he does not imbue the narrative with strong oral elements. He is clearly aware of the asymmetry in language, and at the same time he also understands that language styles and registers constitute only one dimension of localness and realist effects. *Phāṁs* is a Hindi novel rather than a Marathi one in the first place, and the writer is not obligated to provide a facsimile of the actual speech of the inhabitants of the Marathi speaking district. Therefore, instead of imitating villagers' speech, Sanjeev

[1] As I have indicated elsewhere in the thesis, Hindi literature has witnessed a tremendous change in terms of how to negotiate indigeneity. For Premchand, there was no particular attempt to reproduce the speech and registers used by the local farmers of Avadh where he set his writings. See Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere, 1920-1940*, 327. Renu and other regionalist writers marked a significant departure from Premchand in the 50s and 60s.

employs mostly standard Hindi in the dialogues and finds an intermediate solution by replacing certain Hindi words with their Marathi equivalents—*śetī* for *khetī* (farming) in Hindi, *vḍil* for *pitā* (father), *āī* for *māṁ* (mother), *mulgī* for *beṭī* (daughter) and *śetakarī* for *kisān* (farmer) among others. When a Marathi word appears for the first time in the text, a footnote is provided to indicate its Hindi meaning and at times the same note appears more than once in case the reader has forgotten its meaning. This, I suggest, should be considered as a feasible approach that balances the demand of regional flavour and the ease of comprehension for the Hindi reader.

Apart from employing Marathi words, Sanjeev deliberately uses plentiful English words in the villagers' speeches. On the one hand, Sanjeev uses them in the speech of certain characters as a means of characterisation and to achieve comic effect. Kala, an educated young girl who demonstrates great curiosity in agrarian issues, uses English words to illustrate certain concepts. For instance:

> *"yeh kya bolī tū—karpeṭ sośal…?" baṛī ne pūchā.*
> *"karpeṭ nahiṁ tāī kārporeṭ…"* (15)
> "What did you say—corpet social…?" Elder sister asked.
> "It is not corpet sister, corporate…"

The quote shows that Kala is able to pronounce the multisyllabic and abstract English word "corporate" correctly, whereas her sister who is not familiar with the concept fails to do the same. In this context the English word shows that Kala is educated and concerned with the topic in question. On the other hand, current English words also occasionally appear in the speech of other ordinary farmers—"*mast enjvoy* (enjoy) *kar rahi haiṁ*" (32) and "*pānī kī krāisis* (crisis)" (35), for instance. These words found in everyday conversations, I suggest, demonstrate

current practices and the fact that villagers' speech and their lives are not cut off from or isolated from the outside world. Intensified English usage represents the impact of globalisation, which not only brings the foreign genetically modified seeds and exposes the vulnerable cultivators to the fluctuating global market, but also reshapes the rural socio-cultural ambience. Perhaps, Sanjeev is doing the same as what Renu did more than half a century ago—i.e. to "obliterate the urban-rural dichotomy in conceptions about language", as Kathryn Hansen puts it.[1] It can be read as reflecting that factual reality that the mixed use of English and Indian regional languages, recognised as a common practice in the urban India, has gradually found its way into the rural domain.[2] Instead of seeing the village as separated from the city, Sanjeev believes there is continuity between the two. The scattered but flexible and natural appearance of English words in the speech of not only educated but ordinary rural characters symbolises such synthesis.

Caste, Gender and Characterisation

In a previous section, I have emphasised narrative form and explored the strategies that the novel employs to achieve an extensive and realistic portrayal of the agrarian crisis in Vidharbha. As I argued, this is primarily achieved through the detailed, character-oriented subplots. This section explores the novel's representation of rural subjects. I argue that careful characterisation in *Phāṁs* separates it from the social reports of farmers' suicides and embodies its literary aesthetics. As we shall see, the portrayals of different characters go hand in hand with caste and gender

[1] Hansen, 'Phanishwarnath Renu', 154.
[2] For a more detailed investigation of this cultural phenomenon of mixing English with native Indian languages, see Francesca Orsini, 'Dil Maange More: Cultural Contexts of Hinglish in Contemporary India', *African Studies* 74, no. 2 (4 May 2015): 199–220.

dynamics, which, together with the economic agrarian predicament, constitute the most significant coordinates in contemporary Hindi representations of the village.

The issue of caste comes to light very early in the narrative, though it is not spelt out in the conventional paradigm of Dalit texts which emphasise the pain, humiliation and injustice experienced by the lower castes. After sketching the geographic layout of Bangaon village, the opening description finally comes to the subject of caste segregation—Brahmins live outside the village for fear of contact with lower castes, but the temple in the village still indicates their "colonial presence".[1] The description of the bleak state of the temple symbolises how the superiority and influence of the Brahmins are under dispute in this transitional era when dramatic change and reshuffle have taken place in the institution of caste:

> *Mandir kī dānedār grenāiṭ kī pakkī pharś par āye din kaccī dīvār kī śūdr miṭṭī jhar-jhar kar uskī svacchtā, pāvantā ke dhoṁg ko cheṛtī rahtī hai. Pahale Shakun, mugliyāṁ aur Shibū jaise log dharm kā kāraj mānkar pūre parisar ko subah-śām sāph kiyā karte, ab kuch baiṭhe-ṭhāloṁ, gaṁjeṛiyoṁ, naśeṛiyoṁ ke sivā kam hī log āte haiṁ.*
>
> *Ve hī subah-śām kī ārtī ke sthāyī sadasya haiṁ.* (10)
>
> Every day the lowborn dust drops from the poorly-made wall onto the well-made granulated granite floor of the temple, tearing its pretence of cleanness and holiness. People like Shakun, her two daughters and Shibu used to clean the temple as a religious task. Now few people come except a few idlers, hemp addicts and drinkers.
>
> They are the only fixed members of everyday ceremony.

The narrative then zooms in on the Dalit family of Shibu, who is a typical small farmer and the sole breadwinner of the entire household, and who sticks to his role and profession even if farming has become unrewarding. By comparison, his

[1] The hindi word used in the original text is *upaniveś*, usually used for colonisation, which has the connotation of "settlement, occupation and colony". I choose the word "presence", a neutral word of lighter tone, to indicate their changed position. But *upaniveś* is no doubt used very consciously. See Sanjeev, *Phāṁs*, 10.

wife Shakun is discontented with the poor harvest. On top of the failure in agriculture, what irritates her further is that the access to the jungle, whose resources have for centuries been the only alternative to farming that the villagers can rely on for livelihood, has been banned by the local forest department.[1] Shakun attributes their misfortune to their futile belief in Hinduism (*devī-devtāoṁ par saṁśay*), from which her family as well as the entire community hardly benefit. In the hope of freeing herself from these problems, Shakun takes the bold step of converting to Buddhism, though without any explicit connection to Ambedkar's movement. I argue that converting to Buddhism resonates with the metaphorical account of the dilapidated temple—the domination of the Hindu upper castes over Dalits is loosening, encouraging Shakun to take on a new identity and get rid of the grip completely. Despite this, caste is still an issue at stake, otherwise there would be no point in converting. The option of converting to Buddhism provides hope for them to improve their living status.

While challenging the Hindu caste grip, conversion however does not mark the end of troubles for the family. Instead, it stirs up greater agitation as friction arises between Shakun and Shibu, since the latter remains reluctant and sceptical about the idea of giving up his original faith. Moreover, the ambiguous relationship between Kala, their free-minded daughter, and Ashok, a Maratha boy, worries the father. Again, a symbolic act challenging the endogamous norm separating different castes, this inter-caste bond further complicates the way in which caste plays into Shibu's characterisation. On the one hand, Shibu seems stuck in the old values as a Hindu-Dalit; on the other hand, it is his wife and daughter who are pushing him to make the ideological change. When Shakun raises the topic of conversion in front of

[1] Although the narrator does not specify the caste of the family, the assertion of the forest right implies that they could be Adivasi.

her husband, Shibu makes an impromptu vow that he will remain a Hindu until the debt is paid back. His religious identity at this moment becomes an excuse to deflect their rebellion. The rumours about Kala, Ashok and the baby spread by the priest, as well as the echoes among the villagers, become the last straw that breaks Shibu's back. Although the narrative does not reveal the reason behind the priest's move, one can easily label him as a stereotypical "bad Brahmin" character, given his lecherous intention towards Kala.[1] The act of the priest can also be taken as an attempt at revenge in the larger context characterised by the decline of Brahmins. Shibu, an internally bewildered character, fails to find a position between the impact from both sides and finally takes his life.

The critique of caste exemplified by Shibu's story extends further to other aspects of Hinduism in Mohan's subplot. Unlike Shibu, who destroys himself holding on to his Hindu identity, Mohan epitomises how one can suffer from religious cruelty even as a non-Dalit. Selling his dear bull as the only way to save it from starvation is a painful blow to Mohan. Unexpectedly, the bull falls into the hand of a butcher and Mohan thus mistakenly commits the unforgivable sin of "cow murder". Mohan is completely fooled by destiny; the happiness after saving his "*bhai*" suddenly becomes torment:

> *Pūre gāṁv aṁdherā hai. Sirf ek ghar meṁ ḍhibarī kī ghuāṁtī ujās hai. Pūre gāṁv meṁ sannāṭā hai sirf ek ghar se āvāz ā rahī hai—rone kī āvāz!*
>
> *Mohan jī dādā jī igat jī bāghmāre ne phaphakte hue kahā—"mujh par thūko sindhu, thūko. Kal tak maiṁ bāghmāre thā, āj se bhāī māre…!"* (52)
>
> The entire village is in darkness. Only in one home the smoky light of tin lamp is on. The entire village is silent, and sound comes from only one home—the sound of cry!

[1] See Brueck, 'Good Dalits and Bad Brahmins: Melodramatic Realism in Dalit Short Stories'.

> Mohan ji Dada ji Igat ji Baghmare weeps deeply—"Shame on me Sindhu, Shame. I was Baghmare until yesterday, from today 'bhai mare'!"

The quote ends with a pun on Mohan's name—*Baghmare,* literally "tiger-killer", has changed into "*bhai mare*", brother-killer. It also symbolises the change of Mohan's life trajectory, from erstwhile a tiger-like dauntless activist to a helpless and pitiful figure in this era of agricultural decline. This is however just the beginning of Mohan's nightmare; the religious punishment inflicted by a swami allegedly coming from Kashi destroys his nerve and tenacity completely. To atone for his sin, Mohan is instructed to beg like a bull with its lead around the neck. Mohan's dehumanisation offers a punchy critique that indicts the predatory nature of Hindu institution, which, instead of providing any spiritual alleviation of the pain Mohan experiences after losing his "*bhai*", penalises his act committed out of compulsion and helplessness.

With Asha's tragedy, the narrative shifts its critical focus from caste and religion to gender. I argue that the inclusion of women-centred subplots like Asha's is an intentional step taken by the author in order to give a more comprehensive picture of the struggle that local farmers experience. The characterisation of Asha as a hard-working woman who shoulders the responsibility of both cultivation and household maintenance provides a stark contrast with her drunkard and impotent husband. Asha is undoubtedly represented as a strong female character, who readily accepts the fact that she has to take on the duty traditionally assigned to her husband. The conversation between Asha and Shakun during their first joyful meeting, when Shakun visits her relatives in another village, reveals Asha's personality. After happily finding out that they share a lot in common, Asha continues to playfully "challenge" Shakun that her lot is worse:

Lajākar āṁkheṁ tirchī karte hue haṁsne lagī āśā—"magar is bār hār jāogī tāī." Phir usne dhīre se phusphusākar ek rāz kholā—"merā navrā dārūbāz aur nikammā hai."

Śakun ne hathiyār ḍāl diye—"saccī, maiṁ is bār hār gayī. Merā navrā aisā nahiṁ hai, mī hār lī." (58)

Feeling shy, Asha started laughing while looking sidelong—"But you will lose this round, sis." Then she revealed the secret in a whisper—"My man is a habitual drinker and useless."

Shakun put down the weapon—"True, I lost. My husband is not like that. I lost."

Instead of complaining about her husband's inability, Asha banters with Shakun while sharing her "secret". A sense of assertiveness thus can be detected in the character, whose husband does not have a negative impact on her. On the contrary, his idleness becomes her strength. Asha exemplifies female agents who spare no effort to support the family but tragically fail in the end. The name Asha literally means "hope", and the ironic contrast created between her name and the ending of this character only adds to the tragedy. She entertains hope towards herself, towards the agricultural officials who are supposed to grant subsidies, towards her husband that he comes back with good news from the market, and even towards the weather, but all turn out to be in vain. If the discussion of gender in the novel only went as far as Asha's tragedy, one could easily criticise that the gender perspective lacks radicalism. What if had Asha chosen to leave her drunkard husband and lead her own life? Would not it be a more progressive stance? Shakun, for instance, whose decision to convert is presented as a transgressive move in the novel, is further energised by Asha's death to join the campaign of banning alcohol, a manifestation of her agency to generate change.

Kala's struggle in the narrative, I suggest, illustrates Sanjeev's gender politics further. From the very beginning, Kala is portrayed as a character of free will and open mind, constantly challenging the norms in the rural society. Unlike the

image of a typical rural girl of her age, Kala speaks English, prefers jeans to a sari, hangs out with a boy of different caste, and demonstrates great curiosity and commitment to her study. Undoubtedly, Kala as a character symbolises the new generation's wave of change, although the reader can expect that her life trajectory in the village must be full of trials and tribulations.

The opening scene of the novel is associated with this character, whose belated arrival from a dance camp not only stirs up guesses among villagers that something bad has happened to the girl, but also irritates her father, who decides to stop her schooling. Then in the second chapter, the narrative gaze again focuses on Kala, who is stopped by a forest department soldier while wandering alone in the jungle exploring the beautiful scenery when the spring comes. Although she eventually escapes, this incident strengthens Shibu's resolve to stop her education and marry her off as soon as possible. After her father's death, Kala is married into a Buddhist family from another village and permanently separated from her beloved Ashok. In an emotional conversation with her sister before her departure, Kala reveals her inner feelings about herself and Ashok:

> *Maiṁne aisā kyā kar diyā tāī? Merī jo bhūkh thī, ek āg-sī jaltī rahtī man meṁ, jānne kī bhūkh, jijñāsā kī bhūkh jo har pal dhadhaktī rahtī hai. Is samūcī duniyā ko ātmasāt kar lene kī bhūkh, aikcualī, maiṁ use ḍifāin bhī nahiṁ kar pā rahī ṭhik-ṭhik. Deh se jyādā dimāg kī! Rūhanī! Maiṁ duniyā kī har bāt ko jān lenā cāhtī thī, vah thoṛī-bahut aśok se pūrī hotī thī. Skūl se nahiṁ. Āī-bābā se bhī nahiṁ. Tujhse nahiṁ. Paṛosiyoṁ se nahiṁ. Aśok se hoti.* (124)
>
> What did I do sister? There was a desire in me, burning in my mind like fire. The desire of knowing, the desire of curiosity that flames unceasingly; the desire to absorb the whole world. Actually, I cannot even define it properly. It is about the mind, larger than the body! Spiritual! I want to know everything about the world. This can only be realised with Ashok. Neither the school, nor mum-dad. Neither with you, nor the neighbours. Only Ashok.

Apart from rigging Shibu's tragedy, the character of Kala is significant in her own right. The quote justifies her "transgressive" actions in the name of her physical legitimate desire to know and expand her horizons. It suggests that the character would have continued to develop had she had the opportunity, because the quality of exploring without any restriction is an instinct for her. In terms of the relationship between Kala and Ashok, a romance which the reader may have expected to develop, I see their eventual separation as a manifestation of caste disparity between them—an inter-caste union is considered unrealistic at this moment.

In exchange for her consent for sex on wedding night, Kala's husband promises to support her in every aspect, including her desire to continue with her studies. An activist even in the new village she has married to, Kala helps bring electricity for the first time since independence. Although celebrated by the villagers, Kala's deed makes her a thorn in the side of her in-law's family, who require her to behave "properly" (*kāede se rahnā*, 135):

> *"bahut ho gayī netāgirī. Yah sab acchā nahiṁ lagtā."*
>
> *"jī?" Vah cauṁkī.*
>
> *"navarī ho, navarī kī tarah raho. Tum to lok-lāj ko hī ekdam se ghokar piye jā rahī ho." Nanad ne kahā.*
>
> *"merī samajh meṁ nahiṁ āyā ki maiṁne lok-lāj kahāṁ gaṁvā dī?"*
>
> *"isī kartab par bāp ko ātmhatyā karnī paṛī. Vaḍīl ko khāyā aur ab apne pati ko khāne ka irādā hai kyā"* (133)
>
> "Enough of being a leader. It is not good."
>
> "Yes?" She (Kala) was shocked.
>
> "You are a woman. Live like one. You have dismissed the propriety entirely." Said her sister-in-law.
>
> "I don't understand what you are saying."
>
> "Your father had to take his life because of you. After him, are you going to sacrifice your husband as well?"

Even her husband, who had promised to support her, fails to keep his word. This, I suggest, presents a critique of Dalit Buddhism, which fails to address the gender issue despite its success in proposing an alternative to caste inequality within Hindu society. Instead of enduring the grievance and sabotaging herself, Kala courageously escapes from the abusive family and devotes passionately to addressing the issue of excessive use of fertiliser and pesticide in farming, which she finally presents in the *Manthan*. Establishing an independent female character as Kala, Sanjeev provides an insightful critique of the position and difficulties faced by rural women. In comparison to Asha's tragic ending, the Kala's struggle symbolises the strength to break down the shackles that prevent women from realising freedom and agency. From Asha to Shakun and Kala, there is an identifiable progression in terms of the spirit of defiance and resistance. The narrator is constantly pushing the boundary of what female agents can achieve in order to challenge the restrictions put on women in the rural environment.

These subplots and characterisation show that we cannot consider *Phāṁs* merely another report of farmers' suicides. Revolving around a burning theme, the narrative manages to present a wider critique of caste and gender, which are inextricable from the predicament of farmers. I argue that these strategies aim to demonstrate that agrarian distress is a complex reality instead of reinforcing the presumed connection between suicide and indebtedness. Though a sensitive and burning theme, farmers' suicides can be so overwhelming that they tend to mask the complex social dynamics bubbling below the surface. By means of highlighting the subplots foregrounding the dynamics of caste and gender as well as the delicate portrayals of the characters, I have sought to undo the appearance of the text as a "report" and restore its novelistic nature.

Conclusion

The explosion of farmers' suicides in India has signaled that the rural world is mired in deep agrarian crisis. Social scientists have largely focused on the farming-related economic aspects of the issue, in which heavy indebtedness plays a critical role. I have suggested that the agricultural predicament actually began in the 1990s, when the government withdrew the support of the agricultural sector after the economic liberalisation. The financial pressure of the Indian farmers gradually mounted up as the growth in agriculture became stagnant. It is also difficult to compartmentalise mechanically the causes of farmers' distress into farming-related and non-farming-related. As the first Hindi novel dedicated to the theme of farmers' suicides, Sanjeev's novel *Phāṁs*, exemplifies the closeness between literary representation and social scientific discourse. This chapter has focused on the narrative strategies employed in this novel to achieve a vivid portrayal in a realist manner of the agrarian predicament in the Vidharbha district of Maharashtra.

As we have seen, the narrative consists of a fragmented structure characterised by a collection of loosely related subplots dedicated to individual cases of agrarian distress. Such arrangement, rejecting a linear plotline, seeks to demonstrate various aspects of the crisis, leaving the impression of an explosion of tragedies that overlap with each other. Aligned consistently with the distressed farmers, the narrator strives to illustrate the sufferings of them and solicit empathy and solidarity from the reader. Compared to *Nero's Guests*, a documentary on the same theme, the novel depicts overtly the emotional outbursts of the characters, avoiding any possible ambiguity in conveying sentiments. In addition, the novel complements the narrative with non-fictional elements, blurring the boundary between fiction and non-fiction. Linguistically, *Phāṁs* partly conforms to the Hindi regionalist tradition by intentionally using certain Marathi words to enhance local

flavor, while the presence of English words that local farmers use in their daily conversations shows the influence from the outside world.

Although *Phāṁs* presents itself as a comprehensive report on agrarian crisis, the careful characterisation in the subplots underlines its novelistic nature. Each character has to go through struggles associated with their identity, belief and social relations. The portrayals of different characters are intentionally linked to caste and gender dynamics, which, together with the economic agrarian predicament, constitute the most significant thematic tropes in contemporary Hindi representations of the village. The ending of the novel indicates that the village still retains the agency and the possibility of overcoming the crisis.

The next and final chapter is dedicated to contemporary Hindi short stories on the village, a genre which, though lacking the expansiveness of the novels, has produced some of the finest village stories in Hindi, from Premchand to Shivmurti. Given its long and distinguished tradition in Hindi and its importance as a site of literary intervention and debate, a look at the short story allows both a historical comparison between the present and the past, but also a broader view that complements the specific focus of my chapters so far.

Chapter 4
An Attempt to Re-illuminate the Village: *Kathā meṁ Gāṁv*

The anthology *Kathā meṁ Gāṁv* (*The Village in Short Stories,* 2006), containing short tales written between 1994 and 2003, is helpful to navigate through to the vast corpus of Hindi short stories on the village. Through close readings of eight stories from this collection, this chapter seeks to illustrate whether Hindi short story writers are experimenting with different themes and narrative modes, and at the same time, engaging with and critiquing the fast-changing socio-economic circumstances in the rural world. In dialogue with novels, to use Bhaktin's term, these short narratives show several thematic similarities with the novel form.[1] For instance, the agrarian crisis, caste and gender, the three predominant lenses through which Hindi novelists approach the village, also have a significant position in contemporary village short stories, and in order to resonating with the structure of the thesis and the themes of the three earlier chapters, this is also how have I arrange my analysis in this chapter. In the last section, I provide a chronotopic reading of two short stories, in order to explore how spatial motifs play a narrative role in these texts.

Let me first, however, briefly discuss the place of the short story genre in Hindi literature and provide an introduction to the anthology.

Contemporary Hindi Short Stories and *Kathā meṁ Gāṁv*

[1] Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*.

Unlike postcolonial Indian English writing where the novel has a dominant position, the short story has remained the preeminent and most popular genre in Hindi literature.[1] Premchand, one of the most significant Hindi writers of all time, published more than 200 short stories, and everybody in India reads at least one of his stories at school.[2] In the 1950s and 60s, with the emergence of "*Naī Kahānī*" (New story) movement led by writers such as Mohan Rakesh, Nirmal Verma, Rajendra Yadav and Mannu Bhandari, who focused on the lives and psychological worlds of urban individuals, the short story came to dominate the Hindi literary arena.[3]

Today, although the Hindi short story no longer enjoys the same aura as *the* genre spearheading literary innovation as during the "*Naī Kahānī*" movement, it faces no "threat" of becoming marginalised. Instead, the Hindi short story remains a significant genre arguably because of the prominence of the literary magazine which still serves as a major format of publishing as well as a preferred way of reading.[4] All mainstream Hindi literary magazines, including *Hans*, *Pahal*, *Tadbhav* and *Naya Gyānoday*, have a prime section dedicated to the short story in every issue.[5] Writers such as Maitreyi Pushpa, Shivmurti, and Sanjeev, whose novels are analysed in the thesis, continue to publish their short narratives on those magazines. Shivmurti first

[1] For an examination of South Asian short story writing in English, see Neelam Srivastava, 'Minor Literature and the South-Asian Short Story', in *South-Asian Fiction in English*, ed. Alex Tickell (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 253–71.
[2] See Orsini, 'Introduction', 2004.
[3] See Orsini. In a recent doctoral thesis on a comparative study of Hindi and Tamil short stories, Preetha Mani argued that the short story genre in the post-Independence period functioned as a "vehicle through which the idea of a unified Indian nation and people could be imagined", see Preetha Laxmi Mani, 'Gender, Genre, and the Idea of Indian Literature: The Short Story in Hindi and Tamil, 1950-1970' (PhD, University of California, Berkeley, 2012), 2.
[4] Rajendra Yadav, a key member of the "*Naī Kahānī*" movement, ceased to publish fiction in the mid 1980s and became the editor of *Hans*, the most widely published Hindi literary magazine of today. It is arguably true that the ongoing popularity of the short story has in some way benefited from the "*Naī Kahānī*" movement. For an examination of *Hans*'s contributions to the Hindi short story, see Meera Ramrao Nichale, 'Hindī Kahāniyoṁ Meṁ Rājendra Yādav Sampādit Haṃs Patrikā Kā Yogdān' (PhD, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, 2008).
[5] It should be noted that these Hindi literary magazines are mainly associated with serious literature rather than popular literature.

came to fame through his village short story *Tiriyā Carittar* (*The Fallen Woman*), published in *Hans* in 1987, and his novel *Tarpaṇ* was first serialised on *Tadbhav* in 2002 and then re-published in the form of a novel in 2004. Considering the importance of the Hindi literary magazine and its association with the short story genre, it is thus misleading to argue that the minor-major paradigm, which asserts the minority status of the short story genre as opposed to the novel, also applies to Hindi short stories.[1] When it comes to Hindi short stories on the village, however, the scenario becomes more complex and it is here that *Kathā meṁ Gāṁv* comes in.

Yet, as far as the short story genre is concerned, the village is not under-represented either.[2] Even the editor mentions in the introduction that the stories included in the anthology were selected from a much larger corpus, corresponding with my own finding. I agree with the opinion of Gaurinath, editor of the *Hans* special issue on "*saṁgharṣśīl āmjan*" (struggling common people), that the village theme is far from disappearing in Hindi literature.[3] And although Kushwaha might underestimate the reach of the rural voice in his introductory remarks, his anthology undoubtedly consolidates the impression of the vitality of the village in Hindi literature. As by far the only contemporary collection of Hindi short stories dedicated exclusively to the village theme, the release of the book has drawn much attention in the Hindi critical sphere. It is celebrated for its attempt to shed light on the ongoing social transformations and the imaginary of development.[4] Critic Bajrang Bihari

[1] In her examination of South-Asian short Stories in English, Neelam Srivastava draws upon the idea of minor literature and suggests that the production of short narratives published on magazines points to an 'alternative' Indian English canon, see Srivastava, 'Minor Literature and the South-Asian Short Story', 261. In addition, building up upon the minority status of Urdu language as opposed to Hindi in India, Aamir Mufti argues that the Urdu short story provides the vehicle to resonate with the identity of Muslims as a minority, see Aamir Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2007), 182.
[2] *Hans* is the major platform for writers to publish their short stories on village, with more than 60 stories on this theme published during the past 25 years. Other major magazines include *Pahal*, *Naya Gyanoday*, *Sakshatkar* and *Kathadesh*.
[3] See Gaurinath, 'Ham Kis Din Ke Intazār Meṁ Haiṁ?', 4.
[4] See Joshi, 'Gāṁv Ke Yathārth Se Paricit Karātā Saṁkalan'.

Tiwari even claims that the release of the anthology corrected the false impression that the heyday of the village-centred Hindi short story writing has passed.[1] Unlike the anthologisation of the South-Asian short story in English that employs the minor narrative form as the "source of resistance", as Srivastava suggests, *Kathā meṁ gāṁv* is instead premised on the minor-major equation between the village and the city, expressing the urgent need to draw the audience's attention back to the rural world.[2] In the Hindi context, the fact that the short story remains a significant genre only contributes to this effort.

Kathā meṁ Gāṁv expressly includes stories written by authors from different regions of the Hindi belt, with the intention of offering the most complete picture possible and capturing the fast-changing realities of the Hindi-speaking rural world. As the introduction shows, the collection strives to overview contemporary Hindi village short story writing as a vehicle for developing a good knowledge of contemporary rural life:

> By reading this collection, the reader should be able get a sense of farmers' lives in the Hindi speaking regions, their happiness and sorrow, success and failure, dilemma and doubt, delusion and belief. Meanwhile, the reader will understand their strong will of survival in difficult circumstances.[3]

Regionalism should have been a major focus in the collection, given that the table of contents indicates the birth state of every contributor. But the editor has purposefully excluded narratives imbued with strong dialects, a significant characteristic of Hindi regionalism, in order to offer a smooth reading experience:

> We also obtained some stories, which were very good, but we had to leave them out in order to free the reader from the burden of dealing with dialects (*kṣetrīya bhāṣā kī bojhiltā se pāṭhakoṁ ko bacāne ke lie*). Although we fully respect regional languages and

[1] Tiwari, 'Saṅgharṣśīljan Kī Kahāniyoṁ Kā Phalak', 13.
[2] See Srivastava, 'Minor Literature and the South-Asian Short Story', 258.
[3] Pandey, 'Kathā Meṁ Gāṁv Kī Bahurangī Tasvīroṁ Kā Alabam', 6.

> their beauty can be appreciated from some of the selected stories, it is better to opt for uncomplicatedness rather than obscurity (*duruhtā kī tulnā meṁ saraltā kā cayan hī śreyaskar*).[1]

It is thus clear that the anthology consciously targets an urban readership who might not be familiar with strong Hindi dialects, and more broadly, the Indian village, so as to facilitate the editorial aim to get across the "cry of the village". However, as the editor indicates in the quote, not every story is written in standard Hindi. As we shall see, in *Śavyātrā*, for instance, non-standard Hindi appears as a tool of characterisation in a Dalit character's speech to reinforce his caste status. Local Hindi dialects also appear in characters' speech in *Tilesarī* in order to enhance the regional flavour.

The anthology also attempts to diversify the themes of the stories, including rural gender dynamics, caste and Dalit, village politics and the agrarian crisis. This is evident in Manager Pandey's introduction, in which the stories are introduced under the different thematic rubrics. My analysis will also follow a thematic order. At the same time, the close reading will also seek to shed light on modes of writing, including narrative, stylistic and ideological features.

The Struggle of Rural Women

This section concerns two stories in the collection, S. R. Harnot's *Muṭṭhī meṁ Gāṁv* and Ratankumar Sambhariya's *Būṛhī*. Both revolve around a central female character and highlight and affirm their aspirations, agency, resilience and struggle in the rural context. As Manager Pandey suggests in the introduction, the women-oriented stories in this collection register a significant departure from the traditionally perceived rural female subjects confined by the patriarchal

[1] Kushwaha, 'Yah saṅgrah kyoṁ', 17.

surroundings, and instead, feature characters who strive for independence and self-formation.[1] Both narratives feature strong female agents, who share similar qualities with the women in *Phāṁs* and *Almā Kabūtarī*.

Muṭṭhī meṁ Gāṁv conforms to the pattern we have already seen in *Phāṁs* and *Almā Kabūtarī*, in which gender dynamics intersect with caste politics and female characters tend to demonstrate assertiveness unlike their ineffective male counterparts. Mangli a strong Dalit female character who not only refuses to obey her husband, but also shows immense courage in confronting the exploitative high-caste village leader. My reading of the short story focuses on the characterisation of Mangli and the way the caste politics plays out in the rural scenario. Instead, by focusing on the issue of ageing *Būṛhī* pushes the thematic boundary of the representations of rural female subjects beyond male/female and Dalit/upper-caste conflicts and recounts the old woman Burhi's inner anxious turmoil in anticipation of daughter's arrival. Burhi's longing for motherhood evokes Kadambai in *Almā Kabūtarī*, who strives to fulfil her role as Kabutara mother. I particular focus on the narrative devices employed in this short story to construct the touching character of an old mother.

Muṭṭhī meṁ Gāṁv

S.R. Harnot's very brief story, *Muṭṭhī meṁ Gāṁv* (1996), focuses on the struggle of a hill-dwelling Dalit woman who courageously stands up to the village headman and asserts her rights. The story considers a rural culture of intimidation and control, in which Dalits are routinely in the grip of the upper castes who stop them from enjoying their rights. It dramatises the tensions in the village between the Dalit family and the village leader over how to address exploitation—whether to

[1] See Pandey, 'Kathā Meṁ Gāṁv Kī Bahurangī Tasvīroṁ Kā Alabam', 6.

fight mistreatment with resistance and bravery or passively swallow one's anger. The title, literally meaning "the village in hand", refers to the theme of the story, i.e. caste tension and control over resources.

The story unfurls with a description of the situation of Mangli's family, the only Chamar household in the village. Their life is caught in the trap of poverty, and their newly reclaimed wasteland is mortgaged to the village headman due to their daughters' marriages; the headman believes Moti will never have enough money to redeem the land. The villainous (*badmāś*, as Mangli calls him, 90) headman not only encroaches on their land but also displays mischievous intentions towards Mangli, who, consequently, faces exploitation on both counts: caste and gender. The opening polarises the narrative between the Dalit family and the upper caste village headman, constructing him as an exploitative villain and Mangli and her husband the victims of exploitation and manipulation. This paradigm conforms to the morally polarised and fixed model of character relations commonly seen in Dalit writing, in which, as pointed out by Laura Brueck, "the Dalit character embodies absolute, morally pure psychic integrity and is embattled by a world filled with elaborately drawn upper-caste villains".[1] Although Harnot is not a Dalit writer and uses the word "*harijan*" (90), a word condemned by Dalit activists and thinkers, he still employs dramatised moral polarisation as a narrative device to demonstrate his pro-Dalit stance.

The story then moves to focus on domestic gender dynamics. Mangli is portrayed as an independent woman who earnestly begins education even at the age of 45 and becomes a regular attendee at the village women committee meetings. In contrast, her husband Moti is a coward yes-man who follows the lead of the village headman, despite the sufferings caused by his manipulation. Moti also quarrels with Mangli over her study, asking her to focus on domestic chores, but Mangli refuses:

[1] Brueck, *Writing Resistance*, 84–85.

> *"Khud to kuch umr meṁ kiyā nahiṁ. Kālā ākhar bhaiṁs barābar. Maiṁ paṛhne lagī to takalīf ho gaī. Are buddhū, paṛhne kī kyā koī umr hotī hai. Dekhnā tumhārī tarah aṅgūṭhā chāp nahiṁ rahūṁgī."* (91)
>
> "Yourself did nothing at this age. For you black letters look like a buffalo. I began to study and you were bothered. Hey, stupid fellow, does education have an age requirement? Look, I will not be as coward as you."

The quote shows that freethinking Mangli is the locus of resistance, subverting her normative role as confined in the household domain. "*Buddhū*", the epithet she uses to address her husband, can be read as a gesture of defiance against not only her husband's order, but also against their inferior and adverse situation related, to some extent, to his cowardice and ignorance. It can be linked to the word "*badmāś*" used by Mangli in her speech to despise the headman for his misdeeds. The contrast between the couple in terms of whether to stand up to exploitation grows and Mangli's defiant gesture becomes more evident as the story moves forward.

The crux of the narrative regards an incident regarding an expected cow, in which the gender dynamics continues to unfold and entrenches Mangli as a strong woman character. Mangli is in high spirits today because Moti is expected to bring back from the city a Jersey cow, obtained through governmental subsidy, and for which she has been preparing for the whole day. But to her surprise, Moti comes back alone in the evening; the cow has been appropriated by the headman in the name of canceling out their expense in the city. Mangli now comes to fully understand the headman's ploy: he lets Chamars dwell in the village not out of goodwill but because he can benefit himself through manipulation their access to state goods and services. Moti too recognises the headman's exploitative nature but cannot do anything. The description of the states of both Mangli and Moti in this moment highlights their different takes on the issue:

> *Maṅglī khūb samajh gaī pardhān kī chāl. Uskā cehrā tamtamā gayā. Motī nazareṁ jhukāe baiṭhā rahā. Cilam kabhī kī khatm ho gaī thī par vah aise hī dam māre jā rahā thā. Maṅglī ke sāth vah nazareṁ bhī nahiṁ milā sakā.* (93)
>
> Mangli came to know very well the trick of the headman. Her face became red. Moti sit with his head bowed down. The cigarette had finished for a long time but he kept smoking. He could not even have eye contact with Mangli.

It is obvious from the quote that Mangli gets inflamed by the manipulation of the headman—her face becomes red; while Moti also feels cheated, the reader is able to perceive in him neither Mangli's unreserved anger nor any trace of resistance. Even when Mangli begins to sharpen a sickle, indicating her desire for action or revenge, Moti still thinks this is for chopping leaves.

The climax of the story is the confrontation between Mangli and the village headman. The power relations between an upper-caste man and a Dalit woman suddenly, and interestingly, reverses when the two people meet—after seeing Mangli's burning face and the sickle, the headman is scared stiff and the pail nearly drops from his hands. Narrative time stops here. Reproducing Moti's physical and psychological reactions, the headman can do nothing but watch Mangli untie the cow from the stake. This scene of confrontation is further dramatised through the sheer contrast between Mangli, who is portrayed as a heroic figure, an embodiment of justice, condemning headman's dirty tricks, and the headman, completely overwhelmed by Mangli's act:

> *"Hamārā māṁs khā-khākar terā ghar-bār phal-phūl rahā hai. Āj ek gāy par hamārī ummīdeṁ bandhī thīṁ use bhī līl gayā … bahut ho liyā pardhān … thū tere hone ko pāpī."*
>
> *Pardhān ke muṁh par thūk ke chīṁṭe bikhar gae. Par vah kadam bhī āge nahiṁ baṛh pāyā. Ās-paṛos bhī ikṭṭhā ho gayā thā, par sab dūr-dūr khaṛe rahkar hī tamāśbīn bane rahe. Maṅglī kā rūp durgā kā ho gayā thā.* (94)

> "Your family flourish at the cost of our flesh. Today our hope is tied to a cow and even that is encroached … Enough headman … Shame on you, criminal."
>
> The headman's face was splashed with spittle. But he could not move even one step ahead. The neighbours also assembled, watching from a distance. Mangli took on the form of Durga.

From breaking through domestic patriarchal confinement to directly confronting the upper-caste exploiter, Mangli completes the transformation and becomes an icon of resistance. By sublimating Mangli's image into Durga the Hindu warrior goddess in front of spectators—as well as the reader—the narrator confirms her uninhibited and valiant act of confrontation. The climax of *Muṭṭhī meṁ Gāṁv* recalls Premchand's famous story *Ṭhākur kā Kuāṁ*, in which it is the Dalit woman Gangi is scared to drop the water pail when Thakur's door opens, even without seeing his face.[1] The portrayal of a timid Dalit woman character in Premchand's story is replaced here by a defiant woman agent.[2]

The reader may wonder what will happen to the Dalit couple after the confrontation—they might have to face even more fierce vengeance from the headman—but the story ends here, with Mangli now imbued with a happiness she has never experienced before. In this sense, the story may leave an impression of incompleteness. My reading is, however, that the narrator intends to demonstrate the success of the very first phase in Dalit resistance, characterised by open defiance against manipulation. In other words, no change to such mistreatment is possible if no one takes the first step to oppose the exploiting establishment.

Būṛhī

[1] See Premchand, 'Ṭhākur Kā Kuāṁ'.
[2] Manager Pandey also in the introduction points out that Mangli evokes *Godān*'s Dhaniya, who, unlike her husband Hori, is more aware of their exploited situation and more willing to fight back.

Būṛhī (literally meaning an old woman) was written by writer and critic Ratankumar Sambhariya in 1998. From the title, the reader immediately perceives that the tale is about an old village woman, whose real name Chunni only exists on her personal document but is rarely used by others in the village. This detail carries the overtone that the old woman is neglected and unimportant—her identity is just as Burhi, a generic, if not disrespectful, form of address, devoid of any individuality. Burhi is terribly old, "collapsing" (*ṛhahī*), but still lives alone and fends for herself in a derelict hut in the village.

Following a linear plotline, the story, with Burhi as the unaltered focaliser, has a narrow narrative scope concerned with events of just one single day. The narrative sets the stage with a description of the environment, emphasising the sweltering day:

> *Jeṭh thā. Śikhar dopaharī thī. Jaltī lūeṁ thīṁ. Kāyā pasīnā-pasīnā. Kapaṛā utār kar nichoṛo ṭap-ṭap cue. Gāṁv kī ek-ek galī virān, karfyū lagā ho jaise … Sattr sāl kī ho gaī cunnī. Aisī bairan garmī kabhī nahīṁ dekhī usne.* (118)
>
> A summer afternoon. Burning hot wind. Sweating body. Water drips from wrung clothes. Every single lane of the village is empty. Just like curfew … 70-year-old Chunni never saw such heat.

The reference to the heat, which is repeated throughout the story, serves a significant purpose in characterisation, I suggest, sharpening Burhi's discomfort in such extreme weather. The key event that pushes the story forward is the arrival of a long-awaited telegram from Burhi's daughter, who, to use the original word, is the "hope" (*ās*) and "breath" (*sāṁs*) of her life. Her reaction— "*Būṛhī ne tār ko māthe se lagā kar cūm liyā thā*" (Burhi put the telegram on her forehead and kissed it, 118) — confirms the importance of her daughter and the message. The aspect of

motherhood, a central theme of the story, adds to Burhi's persona, and the image of her as merely a disregarded old woman begins to change.

Urgently needing to know the content of the message, Burhi decides to ask the village schoolmaster for help. The narrator keeps reminding the reader of the heat as Burhi becomes directly exposed to the scorching sun on her way to the school:

> *Sīr par āg kā golā-sā sūraj thā. Būbhal se garm ret par būṛhī ṭūṭī cappaloṁ meṁ aise calī jā rahī thī, manoṁ koī abhyast kalākar aṅgāroṁ par naṅge pāṁv caltā hai.* (119)
>
> Overhead the sun was like a fire ball. Burhi walked on hot sand with a pair of worn sandals, as if a skilled artist walking on burning coal barefoot.

It becomes clear here that the description of heat—a repetitive and hyperbolic marker, as the analogy used here shows—is deployed not only as merely a narrative backdrop, but instead as an element imbued with symbolic meaning, adding to the difficulties that Burhi has to overcome in order to find out her daughter's message and, in a wider sense, realise her motherhood.

The story continues to foreground Burhi's struggle. Surprised by Burhi's visit in such extreme heat, the schoolmaster tells her that according to the telegram her daughter is supposed to come today. Instead of bringing joy and happiness, the news worries Burhi—her pension has yet to come and she has no money left at home. Her daughter is married into a rich family and leads a life of wealth and honour. Burhi then decides to borrow money from the schoolmaster. The detailed and realistic description highlights the emotional and psychological undercurrent which is significant to her characterisation:

> *Vah sahmī-sahmī masṭar jī kī khāṭ ke pās jākar khaṛī ho gaī thī aur aise sāṁs lene lagī thī, mano sūkhā nal sāṁs rahā ho. Būṛhī ne sāhas juṭākar māsṭar jī ke tarbatar kandhe par apnā hāth rakh diyā thā "māssāb."* (120)

> She moved close to the Master's bed with fear, starting to breathe as if air came from a dry pipe. Burhi took her courage to put her hand on the drenched shoulder of Master ji, and said "Massab".

The rhetorical devices in the quote, such as the use of qualifiers "*sahmī-sahmī*", "*sāhas juṭākar*" and the analogy between Burhi's breath and the air in a dry pipe, create a vivid image of a mother who is ready to put herself in great inconvenience for her daughter, a "*mahārānī kī mahārānī*" (the highest queen, 121). At the schoolmaster's refusal, Burhi has no choice but to exchange with him a precious item for only 100 rupees. The plot tugs at the reader's heartstring by showing how much pain and cost the mother can endure to satisfy her daughter and also fulfil her maternal responsibility. Until now the story seems be about an imbalanced mother-daughter relationship, in which the meaning of Burhi's life is entirely projected on her daughter, who is mysteriously, if not purposefully, missing in the narrative, and there is no sign that Burhi's painstaking struggle is going to be rewarded.

Since the focalisation does not move away from Burhi, the story continues to focus on the articulation of maternal subjectivity. Motivated by the telegram, the mother makes every possible preparation for the anticipated arrival of her daughter. However, as the narrative lays no emphasis on Burhi's daughter, the reader is unable to gauge her reaction, and it is thus natural to raise questions about the impetus behind Burhi's acts. The narrative attempts to justify Burhi's efforts through a flashback which highlights the pleasure she felt during her daughter's last visit, a moment when they were well-treated by the high-caste Babhani and Thakurain of the village. And because of her daughter, Burhi felt the happiness of respect as never before— "*pad aur paise ke sāmne jāt jūtī hai*" (caste means nothing in front of status and wealth, 123). This is the only reference to caste throughout the story. Although not specified in the text, it is likely that Burhi is from a lower caste. The flashback

also reminds the reader of previous scene in which Burhi is illtreated by the schoolmaster—possibly due to her caste.

By invariably focalising on Burhi, the story constructs a vivid and touching image of an old village woman who, though disregarded, still cares about her daughter. At the same time, the narrative hints the loneliness and heedlessness experienced by a typical left-behind village old woman. From the very beginning Burhi is portrayed as a nameless and unimportant person, who lives alone and is taken care of by no one. The ending of the story overturns the tonality of the story and therefore invites further consideration. Managing to hire a horse cart, Burhi goes to wait for her daughter at the bus stop because she believes it is not proper for her walk back home, given both her status as a daughter-in-law of a big family as well as the extreme weather. But her daughter does not appear even after the last bus has left. Only at this moment the protagonist realises the killing heat of the day—again, the reference to the weather performs a narrative function to the very end. When Burhi arrives home, she sees her daughter getting off a car, and the story ends here. Had the daughter not appeared at all, the story would have carried stronger realist effect of neglect. But after foregrounding Burhi's helplessness throughout the story, the unexpected ending shows a lighter and more emotional touch than most of the other stories.

The Many Faces of Caste

Two short stories from the anthology, *Viṣbel* and *Śavyātrā*, explore different aspects of the caste question. In my examination of *Chappar* and *Tarpaṇ* in chapter two, I have shown that one prominent change in the representation of rural caste dynamics is the overt assertion of *izzat* and boldness in resisting exploitation and

humiliation by low-caste characters. This is also evident in the two short stories in question, as well as in *Muṭṭhī meṁ Gāṁv*, as we just saw.

Resembling *Tarpaṇ*'s tight-knit plotting of the conflict between two caste groups, Jaynandan's story *Viṣbel* offers a blow-by-blow account of political dynamics in the village, and how an inter-caste relationship gradually spirals into a brutal armed conflict. The violence turns the village into a battlefield, inflicting bloodshed on both caste groups. In addition to revealing the shifting caste dynamics and documenting the conflict, as Shivmurti does in *Tarpaṇ*, *Viṣbel* also asks questions about the future of this violent rural domain. The first-person narrator, who is aligned with the lower-caste community (the reader is not told whether they are Dalits), not only recounts the story but also offer his own sympathetic critique of the village mired in sheer violence and casteist hatred. The ending brings a dramatic and idealised reconciliation between the two castes thanks to the victimisation of the narrator's mother, I suggest, indicates that the village does have the agency to restore peace and harmony. In that sense, it shares a similar utopian vision as in *Chappar*.

By contrast, *Śavyātrā* shows that lower-caste people continue to suffer from humiliation and bullying because of their identity, and that their resistance and disobedience seem to be in vain. Yet unlike most other Dalit texts which are mainly concerned with inter-caste issues, *Śavyātrā*, written by the celebrated Dalit writer Omprakash Valmiki, expands the thematic territory of Dalit writing to narrate the discrimination within the Dalit community and its deadly consequences. Despite this original unique, the short story adheres to the polarised paradigm of characterisation in which the "good" lower-level Dalits endure humiliation and oppression at the hands of higher-level "bad" Dalits.[1] This challenges the reader's moral alignment, given both the villains and the victims belong to the Dalit community. While

[1] See Brueck, 'Good Dalits and Bad Brahmins: Melodramatic Realism in Dalit Short Stories'.

illustrating the struggle the lower-level Dalits face to build a house in the village, a symbolic move of resistance and defiance, my analysis also suggests that Valmiki appeals for solidarity within the Dalit community.

Viṣbel

First published in 2002, Jaynandan's story *Viṣbel*, through a description of the conflict between two different caste communities, raises questions about the present and future of the rural domain, asking whether the village will remain mired in brutal violence and terror, devoid of any law and order, or whether some elements of hope are still left to lift the village to restore some degree of harmony. *Viṣbel* is an interesting title, coined by the writer himself by combining two the words, *Viṣ*, literally meaning poison, and *bel*, vine, symbolising the uncontrolled force of non-stop growth. The title thus carries metaphorical connotations of a destructive process, a contagious and deadly disease.

Narrated by a first-person lower-caste narrator, the story details his coming-home journey to the village in order to make arrangements for the funeral of his mother, who lived alone in the village but unexpectedly became a victim in the bloody caste clash. The narrator lives far away from the village in the city and rarely goes back, because now his village is a battlefield (*kurūkṣetr*), where "the naked dance of death is continuing on every inch of ground" (*cappe-cappe meṁ maut kā naṅgā nāc cal rahā hai*, 187). Here lies a subtle intergenerational narrative in terms of the different perceptions on the village—the older generation always choose to stay, whereas the younger people prefer to leave, a contrast also featured in *Śavyātrā*. As the story moves forward, the reader comes to know that the narrator himself is involved in the battle and because of it the village has become a dystopian

world. A description of the infrastructures in the village reflects such decay and stresses the urban-rural divide:

> *Ham jis saṛak par jā rahe the, vah mukhya saṛak thī aur us par lagātār chotī-baṛī gāṛiyoṁ kā ānā-jānā jārī thā. Lekin vah saṛak aisī thī. Jiskā kuch bhī durust-sābut nahiṁ thā. Jagah-jagah par baṛe-baṛe gaḍḍhe ho gaye the, kahīṁ-kahīṁ saṛak gāyab hī ho gaī thī. Raṇjīt hairat meṁ thā ki aisī bhī koī saṛak ho saktī hai … nahar, bijlī, skūl, kālej, sabkā yahī hāl hai.* (196)
>
> We were going on a main road, small-big cars coming and going. But the road was like this: not even a single part was intact. Big pits had spread here and the road had disappeared altogether. Ranjit was astonished that this could even be called a road … Irrigation channel, electricity, school, college, everything is like this.

A friend of the narrator's, Ranjit, who grew up in the city, has come with him to see how the "innocent, simple and noble" (*bholā, saral, śarīf aur udār*) village portrayed in books and tales has turned "cunning and harsh" (*śātir aur barbar*). But the reality still strikes him. Ranjit embodies the typical view that tends to exoticise the rural world as idyllic. In comparison, as we shall see later, the narrator bears more complex feelings towards the village.

The conflict in the village is triggered by a forbidden romance between a lower-caste man of the narrator's community and an upper-caste woman. They elope successfully with the help from the narrator but leave the village mired in dreadful violence. The narrator does not seem constrained by the narrow-mindedness of casteism and opts to help true love succeed. Yet, at the same time, ironically (*ajīb viḍambanā*, a strange irony, to use the original words), he cannot stop himself from providing financial support to the gang of his own caste who are fighting a war originated as much by the inter-caste couple as by the narrator himself—using violence to stop violence—even though innocent people of both parties are being killed, including eventually his own mother. The position of the narrator as a city

dweller originally from the village invites further consideration, as he seems to be trapped between the two different cultural realms. On the one hand, the narrator's choice of supporting the inter-caste union marks a significant departure from the caste-based principle that still dominates the village. On the other hand, providing support to his caste gang indicates the impossibility to break with the caste moorings in the village. The narrator holds a complex and ambivalent attitude towards the situation in his village and gets caught in a dilemma, because of which, despite his opposition to caste radicalism, he makes an egoist choice to take refuge in the city instead of trying to end the violence. Perhaps his ability falls short of his ambition to restore peace in the village.

The story allocates considerable narrative space to the account of the ongoing conflict, as in *Tarpaṇ*. As the narrative moves forward, the reader realises that the inter-caste relationship does not construct the entire picture of the violence but an incident that only lit the fuse. The larger backdrop is the shifting dynamics between the two castes:

> *Hamāre nānh ṭole ke zyādātar log babuānoṁ ke khetoṁ meṁ kām karte the aur majūrī baṛhāne ko lekar aksar unmeṁ tanātanī banī thī. Naī pīṛhī ke laṛkoṁ meṁ yah tanātanī zyādā ugr ho gaī. Paṛhāī-likhāī tathā buddhi-vivek kī kuch khulī khiṛkiyoṁ se kiraṇeṁ ab un par āne lagī thīṁ. Ve nāiṅsāfī aur adhikār-hanan ko samajhne lage the. Jo paṛh sakte the ve taklīf uṭhākar bhī paṛhāī kī tarf muṛ gae, jo nahiṁ paṛh sakte the ve śaharoṁ meṁ jākar dihāṛī karnā zyādā śreyskar samajhne lage.* (189)
>
> Most people of our lower caste used to work on the Babuans' land and there was tension aroud the issue of increasing wages. Among the new generation the tension became over-intense. A few rays of education and knowledge had begun to shine on them through some opened windows. And they began to get a sense of injustice and rights. Those who could study turned to education, those who could not thought earning daily wage sin the city was more rewarding.

This quote shows that the lower-caste community are now able to rid themselves of economic dependence on the upper-caste, either through education or through working in the city. Thus, the escalated tension should be seen as a result of a long-standing process, in which the new generation of the lower-caste people are redefining their identity. Though triggered by the forbidden romance, as the tension develops and more people become victims, the conflict gradually moves away from its original cause. The conflict advances like a game of chess, with the gangs of lower and upper castes exchanging moves. When Tillu, the leader of the upper-caste gang, manages to kill 5 people of the lower caste community, in return, Dinnath, the head of the opposing force, demonstrates his "bloodthirsty nature" (*khūṁkhār pahcān*) by murdering even more.

Although the narrator is aligned with the lower-caste, he is still concerned with the village mired in violence:

> *Is tarah nirdoṣ, nihtthe aur māsūm log maut ke śikār hone lage, barbād hone lage, anāth hone gale. Sāmūhik cīkh-pūkār aur vilāp kā ek ārtnād gāṁv kī cāroṁ diśāoṁ se ṭakarātā aur dhīre-dhīre svataḥ mand paḍ jātā.* (191)
>
> In this way innocent, unarmed and harmless people became victims of death, were destroyed and orphaned. Collective screams and cries of pain spread to every corner of the village and then slowly abated.

The quote suggests that the resistance of the lower-caste has crossed its limit and gone in a wrong direction, as human nature and conscience are trampled on by the casteist mindset, which has transformed to a sheer impulse to revenge and slaughter. In addition, the narrator comes to realise that the lower-caste gang are not so much motivated and radicalised by the objective of stopping violence and injustice—the very reason that the propels the narrator into supporting his community in the first

place—as by the act of killing itself. The resistance has changed meaning and turned into an unstoppable armed confrontation.

The brutal violence is as much a collective tragedy as an individual one. On his way to the village, the narrator is escorted by some young followers of Dinnath in case of an attack from their enemies. The narrative reveals with empathy their background stories, one after another. They all share nearly the same experience of having family members killed by the upper-caste Babuans. The circumstances have left them no alternative but to join the battle. *Viṣbel*, the title, summarises the situation. Collective resistance creates individual tragedies, and in turn the collective tragedy expands; it is like a black hole that absorbs more and more people into it. Even the police are at a loss at what to do. A local police officer states, "when offenders permeate every village then nothing can be done by any administration" (*jab gāṁv-kā-gāṁv muzrim ban jae to ismeṁ koī praśāsan kuch nahiṁ kar saktā*, 203). It is interesting that in this case the police do not align themselves with either party, nor do they perform the villainous role as in *Tarpaṇ* and *Almā Kabūtarī*. The police, I would argue, take approximately the same approach as the narrator who, despite his emotional understanding of the situation, fails to virtually participate in the process of rectification.

The plot registers an unexpected turn at the end, when the narrator learns about his mother's death. His mother is surprisingly killed by Dinnath rather than the Babuans because she discloses to them a massacre plan in order to stop it. Then Ramnath, the man in the inter-caste relationship, courageously confronts the upper-caste community, despite the narrator's opposition, and manages to peacefully resolve the dispute. The climax and ending, seemingly abrupt and unrealistic given that the two communities have been at daggers drawn for so long, offers a "narrative

resolution to a real problem".[1] From a caste conflict, *Viṣbel* gradually expands its theme to encompassing the larger critique with regard to the existential question of the village, refuting the pessimistic view that the rural domain has been reduced to a dystopia. Although the village is ravaged, there is still hope of benevolence left to restore peace. There are still forces from within to counter the destructive tendency.

Śavyātrā

Also engaging with the theme of caste, Omprakash Valmini's *Śavyātrā* (*The Funeral Procession*, 1998) deals with a different aspect of this issue. As an eminent Dalit writer, Valmini's stories touch upon the harsh reality of Dalit subjects, highlighting their experiences of marginalisation and exploitation. But, as already mentioned, this story pushes the boundary of Dalit narratives by focusing on discrimination and injustice within the Dalit community. Dispelling the impression created by the overarching Dalit discourse that the community work together to fight caste discrimination, *Śavyātrā* instead reveals the internal conflicts among different Dalit castes. The story centres around one event: how the dominant Chamars in the village prevent the only Balhar family from building a new house, which is regarded as a symbol of overstepping their position. The story also touches on several other themes common to the fiction dealing with caste and Dalits, including the urban-rural dichotomy, where the city is the site of progress and modernity while in the village the mindset revolving social hierarchies still dominates. It is also an account of intergenerational relationships, a touching portrayal of a family tragedy revolving around a father-son relationship. The story was also included in another collection titled *Śreṣṭh Hindī Kahāniyāṁ 1990-2000* (*Best Hindi stories 1990-2000*), because, according to its introduction, the story generated a new debate in the realm of Dalit

[1] Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 62.

literature by offering an insight on the internal problems of Dalit society.[1] However, the groundbreaking thematic matter is only part of its aesthetic power.

Śavyātrā follows the narrative structure of a typical Dalit narrative which, as in *Chappar,* first makes clear the caste disparity. The geographical description at the opening sets the stage in terms of physical environment of the village, characterised by the segregation between the Chamars and the only Balhar family, which is the centre of the following narrative. The reader immediately knows their inferior status—the only Balhar family is separated spatially from the Chamar village by a pond, which not only performs the function of a boundary but is also the only available connection with the main village when it is not filled with water. When they need the Balhars, the Chamars stand on one side of the pond and shout, to avoid direct contact. The act of shouting carries a hierarchical implication, as if to signify that the Balhars are at the Chamars' beck and call. This geographical segregation informs the narrative, which focuses on the Balhars' marginalisation at the hands of the Chamars.

Although the story does not directly deal with the inter-caste dynamics between upper castes and Dalits or lower castes, unlike *Muṭṭhī meṁ Gāṁv* and *Viṣbel*, the opening suggests the similar binary narrative structure. Moreover if, as Laura Brueck suggests, the organising principle of moral polarisation employed in much Dalit writing aims to associate the reader's sentiment closely and unquestionably with the "good" and suffering Dalits, it is intriguing to ask whether *Śavyātrā* pushes this narrative device in a new direction.[2] The fact that this story deals with discrimination within the Dalit community complicates the matter, in which the same Dalits, who are themselves victims of caste discrimination,

[1] See Uma Shankar Chaudhri, 'Bhūmikā', in *Śreṣṭh Hindī Kahāniyāṁ 1990-2000*, ed. Uma Shankar Chaudhri and Jyoti Chawla (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 2010).
[2] Brueck, *Writing Resistance*, 85.

reproduce the mistreatment and become perpetrators.[1] It thus becomes disputable whether in such context the reader is still required to morally aligned with the lower-level Balhars.

The position of Kallan and his relationship with the village as well as with his father Surja invite further consideration. Enjoying a normal life with a fresh identity in the city, Kallan is thrown into alienation, a crisis of identity, whenever he goes back to the village, where he remains the inferior Kallu in the eyes of other Chamars. Valmiki writes:

> *Gāṁv vah yadā-kadā hī ātā thā. Lekin vah jab bhī gāṁv ātā, camār use ajīb nazaroṁ se dekhte the. Kallū se kallan ho jāne ko ve svīkār nahiṁ kar pā rahe the. Unhī driṣṭi meṁ vah abhī bhī balhār hī thā. Samāj vyavsthā meṁ sabse nice yānī achūtoṁ meṁ achūt…Gāṁvvāle use kallū balhār hī kah kar bulāte the. Use yah sambodhan acchā nahiṁ lagtā thā. Naśtar kī tarah use bīṁdhkar hīn bhāvnā se bhar detā thā.* (109)
>
> He came to the village only occasionally. But whenever he did, the chamars of the village eyed him strangely. They were not able to digest the fact that Kallu had become Kallan. In their eyes he was still a balhar, lowest in the caste hierarchy, an untouchable even among the untouchables … The villagers still called him Kallu balhar. He didn't like being addressed in that way. It pierced him like a sharp knife and filled him with a sense of inferiority.[2]

Unlike *Viṣbel,* where the narrator retains the hope that the village may save itself from the mire of caste conflict, this story suggests that the village has to be abandoned. From Kallan's perspective, the village is associated with his old identity and brings up all the bad memories of discrimination. It is a typical Dalit view that echoes *Jūṭhan*. Kallan can easily get rid of his burdensome past and start afresh with

[1] The intra-Dalit discrimination also reflects Ambedkar's observation of caste that "different castes are placed in a vertical series one above the others—the principle of gradation and rank". See B. R. Ambedkar, 'The Hindu Social Order—Its Essential Features', in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches Vol. 3*, ed. Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014).
[2] Translations of excerpts from this this short story are by Naresh Jain. See Omprakash Valmiki, 'Shavayatra', in *Amma and Other Stories*, trans. Naresh K. Jain (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2008), 212–23.

a new identity in the city where no one knows him, but the village, a space of pre-existing social connections, can only stop the course of his identity recreation.

However, his own father Surja, the only reason for Kallan to come back, stands in the way of the departure from the stigmatised identity. Surja opposes Kallan's strong urge to leave the village, despite Kallan's assertion that "there is neither respect, nor livelihood; even in the eyes of the chamars we are mere balhars" (*yahāṁ na to izzat hai, nā roṭi. camāroṁ kī nazar meṁ ham sirf balhār haiṁ*, 109). Here the intergenerational narrative comes in. Brushing off Kallan's effort to convince him, Surja responds with his own idea of village, one invested with great spiritual value:

> *Nā beṭte, ib ākhrī bakhat meṁ yo gāṁv kyūṁ chuṛvāve ... purkhoṁ ne yhāṁ ākke kisī jamānne meṁ derā dāllā thā. Yahīṁ mar-khap gae, isī māṭṭī meṁ. Is johaṛ kī ṛhaiṁg pe rahake jingī kāṭ dī. Ib kahāṁ jāṁge.* (109)
>
> No, my son, no. Why do you want us to leave the village near the end of my life? At one time my ancestors had found themselves a place here. They all died here, on this very ground. I've spent my entire life living at the pond. Where shall we go now!

Cleaving a wide split between father and son, different takes on the village locate them on opposing sides of modernity and tradition. For Surja, the village embodies an emotional link back to his ancestors and forefathers, elevating it from a physical space to a symbolic site of spiritual roots. The village cannot be abandoned. Now Kallan faces a dilemma. On the one hand, the city is dragging him out of the suffocating mire of the village; on the other hand, Kallan is bound by the filial duty to obey his father, an inherited consciousness that brings him on the same ground as Surja's attitude towards his ancestors.

Meeting his father halfway, Kallan finally promises to build a well-made, *pakka* house, which becomes the crux of conflict in the narrative. In her

interpretation of another short story of Valmiki's, *Paccīs Caukā Ḍeṛh Sau* (25 fours are 150), Laura Brueck argues that the filial piety of the protagonist serves as "testament to the goodness of his character", signifying the unambiguous moral virtue of Dalit characters.[1] But here, Kallan's filial act rather fulfils a tragic narrative function that results in the family subject to severe intimidation and discrimination and is linked directly to the tragic death of Kallan's daughter in the closure. Clearly, abandoning the village would have been a better choice for the family.

Valmiki consciously uses different registers to reflect the characters' status and inform their characterisation. Surja's speech in the quote carries strong dialectal traits (*ib*, *yhāṁ*, *māṭṭī* etc in the previous quote), whereas Kallan speaks standard Hindi, signifying his educated status. These different registers work as a realist device to enhance authenticity and differentiate characters along social lines. But does this imply that there is an inevitable connection between political awareness of Dalit characters and the registers they use? I go back to Brueck's interpretation of *Paccīs Caukā Ḍeṛh Sau*, in which she argues:

> For many contemporary Dalit writers, Dalit consciousness, that politically awakened frame of mind that refuses to accept the casteist status quo, simply cannot be expressed in regional dialectical inflection because such inflection is too weighted with connotations of tradition, backwardness, and political ignorance.[2]

To support this argument, she points out that the father in that story becomes speechless the moment he realises the truth of manipulation and remains silenced till the very end. It leaves the impression that register works as a symbol of a character's awareness of Dalit consciousness, with the enlightened Dalits speaking standard Hindi and the unenlightened and the "bad" upper-caste using dialect. *Śavyātrā* follows this pattern, but only up to a point. When Surja becomes aware of the village

[1] Brueck, *Writing Resistance*, 91.
[2] Brueck, 113.

headman's threat that building a new house amounts to "forgetting his own limits" (*apnī aukāt bhūl gayā*), he expresses his resentment in the same dialectal speech but with more intense emotion:

> *"Tū sac kahve thā kallū ... yo gāṁv rahṇe lāyak nā hai." Uskī lambī mūṁcheṁ gusse se pharpharā rahī thī. Āṁkhoṁ ke kor bhīge hue the ... "Nā beṭṭe makān to īb baṇke rahvegā ... apṇī jān de dūṁgā, par yah gāṁv choṛke nā jāūṁgā," surjā ne gahre ātmviśvās ke sāth kahā.* (112)
>
> "You were right, Kallu. This village is not fit to live in." His long moustaches were quaking with anger. His eyes were wet … "No, my son, the house shall be built. I will lay down my life but I shall not leave this village," said Surja with self-confidence.

I would argue that it is not the speech itself—Surja still speaks in non-standardised Hindi—but the emotion highlighted in the way of speaking that signifies the moment of realisation. Instead of modifying Surja's speech, the third person narrator emphasises his "quaking moustaches" and "self-confidence".

Not satisfied with his newly found awareness, Surja is determined to build the new house, a symbol of defiance. But no builder is willing to build the house for them because of the intimidating Chamars, just as no doctor is ready to treat Kallan's sick daughter, whose tragic death marks the end of the story. As I have indicated in the beginning, part of the significance of *Śavyātrā* lies in its deep reflection on the issue of internal hierarchy and discrimination within Dalit community, marking a departure from most Dalit narratives. By not actualising the family's resistant act, Valmiki, I argue, uses the tragic ending to lay stress on the severity of intra-Dalit discrimination, and to solicit solidarity form his own Dalit people. There is no possibility for Dalits to emancipate from the casteist oppression if the disease strikes from within.

Reflections on the Economic Agrarian Predicament

Two other short stories from the collection, Subhash Chandar Kushwaha's *Tilesarī* and Punni Singh's *Maṁsā Baṛhaī*, consider the ongoing economic and social changes in the rural world. While the liberalisation has accelerated the pace of economic growth in the Indian cities, the two stories, just like the novel *Phāṁs* discussed in the last chapter, suggest that the village is not benefiting from it and is instead adversely influenced by the repercussions of liberalisation, as people are deprived of their traditional livelihood. The stories serve as compelling evidence for the "two-Indias" claim. Unlike *Phāṁs* which deals with the issue of farmers' suicide, the two stories share a similar concern with village petty commodity makers unable to diversify their livelihood in an era when their traditional skills have become obsolete. Although in both *Viṣbel* and *Śavyātrā* we saw young generation characters who manage to lead better lives in the city, *Tilesarī* and *Maṁsā Baṛhaī* discount the city as a choice for the struggling rural craftsmen.

Fully aware of the changing economic circumstances, *Tilesarī* begins with a family of potters and soon expands its narrative scope to the Deoria region of eastern Uttar Pradesh, a traditional sugar producing area that is losing its significance due to external competition. The way in which this short story documents the predicament of the village recalls the model of the reportage, permeated as it is with non-fictional details. By comparison, *Maṁsā Baṛhaī*, a more private story, narrows the narrative scope to an encounter between the first-person narrator, Punit, and his old acquaintance Mansa, who, to the surprise of the narrator as well as the reader, comes to paddle home-made guns; this prompts a narrative flashback that recounts his life story. Both *Tilesarī* and *Maṁsā Baṛhaī* empathise with the rural characters and lay out the problems of rural economic decline. Unlike *Phāṁs*, no solution is provided.

Tilesarī

Written by the editor Subhash Chandra Kushwaha himself in 2002, *Tilesarī* is a story documenting as much the economic decay and unemployment in the post-liberalisation era from a macro perspective as the fall of agrarian labour on the micro level. The story is named after a woman character; but instead of being a woman-oriented narrative dedicated exclusively to Tilesari, as we saw in *Būṛhī*, it starts from her small family and then extends to offer as a collective album of different villagers facing similar struggle of poverty induced by the larger economic processes. In this sense, it is as much a family tale as a collective record of the village. My analysis focuses on its narrative strategy, which lays considerable emphasis on realist representation, exposition, and critique. Unlike stories such as *Viṣbel* with a carefully constructed and suspenseful plot, the narrative in *Tilesarī* moves slowly and is not entirely driven by the gradual development of the storyline. Playing the role of an observer, the narrator seems act to guide the reader on a tour of Tilesari's family and the village. The story also leaves the reader with an open ending, in which we are unable to see a future for the family or the village immersed in the flow of change. Shifting between macro and micro perspectives, the narrator frames the story using two sets of comparison. The first is a more obvious one between the easy and comfortable past and the harsh present for agricultural labourers; and the second features a sheer contrast between the rich and poor, derived from a subplot in the storyline.

The story opens with focalisation on Tilesari, using a flashback to evince the change of her life as she ages and setting the tone for her decline in status and new social liminality. There was a time when Tilesari was the "sister-in-law" (*bhaujāī*) of the whole village, though people would like to make fun of and irritate her on purpose as a gesture showing closeness and intimacy, and this is the first contrast

between then and now. Now everything has changed: the harmless naughtiness, a symbol of harmonious vibe, in the villagers has disappeared, and Tilesari is surrounded by the "bottomless sea of misery" (*dukhoṁ ke athāh sāgar*). The narrative focus then zooms out to introduce the larger backdrop of unemployment of the region, which has triggered such transition, and in which Tilesari's son Ramtirath is also a victim.

> *Kabhī devriyā janapad, deś kā sarvādhik cīnī mil vālā jilā thā. Kul caudah cīnī mileṁ thīṁ is janapad meṁ. Samay se miloṁ kā ādhunikīkarṇ na kie jāne evaṁ vibhinn sarkāroṁ dvārā bāhar se cīnī āyāt karne ke kāraṇ, dhīre-dhīre mileṁ ghāteṁ meṁ calī gaīṁ. Mil mālikoṁ aur sarkār, kisī kī icchā miloṁ ko calāne kī nahiṁ thī. Islie ek-ek kar ke āṭh mileṁ band ho gaīṁ … dekhte hī dekhte saikaṛoṁ majadūroṁ ke sāmne rozī-roṭī kī samasyā ā khaṛī huī.* (223)
>
> Once the region of Deoria was the district with most sugar mills in the country. There were in total fourteen mills. But because of sluggish modernisation and sugar imports from outside by different governments, the mills gradually suffered from losses. Neither the owners nor the government were willing to carry on the business. Hence eight mills shut down one after another … In no time at all livelihood became an issue for hundreds of workers.

The quote reveals the narrator's effort to contextualise Tilesari's personal situation against a realistic picture of what has happened in the region, which is for the first time foregrounded in the narrative. The "sugar bowl" of the country has lost its sweetness due to external pressure, brought about by globalisation and liberalisation. A small point worth noting in the quote is that the reference to specific number—there used to be fourteen mills and then eight went bankrupt—which gives the impression that the description works as a factual report of local social-economic information. Paying attention to such details, the narrator wants to remind and convince the reader of the reliability of the information.

The narrative then switches back to Tilesari's family and gives us their background. We learn that they are from the caste of Gond, a low-caste tribal

community of potters. But unlike other texts focusing on caste-based discrimination and injustice, this story underscores their economic hardship. Another flashback introduces another comparison between past and present, emphasising the sudden decline. When Tilesari married into the village 30 years earlier, everyone in the family had a job and they were able to earn their livelihood. But since Ramtirath lost his job in the sugar mill, the family was severely hit by poverty. Tilesari's mother-in-law dies because of lack of proper medication, but for the household the death means that a huge burden finally gets lifted. The relationship between Ramtirath and his father Phagu also worsens because he becomes depressed and jobless. Moreover, their family business—making pots—experiences a huge slump as people now prefer plastic and paperware. The first half of the story thus uses comparison to detail every setback of the family in the face of broader socio-economic transformations. Instead of the description of village layout to highlight spatial marginalisation, a section we have seen in many village narratives, the story only mentions the fact that the gardens in the village, which used to be available to everyone and provided Tilesari with leaves as fuel, have now become out of bounds due to privatisation. This reinforces the beginning of the story, suggesting that the village has lost its harmonious vibe and is no longer a space where everyone can live easily and comfortably.

The story now gradually opens up its scope to encompass other villagers through their conversations with Tilesari, who plays the role of a hub that ties together subplots and may explain why the story is titled after this character. The heteroglossic speeches of the villagers dominate the second half of the story and are imbued with heavy dialectal traits, which as we have seen are sometimes used as markers of authenticity and regionalism. For instance, standard Hindi "*kyā*" (what) is replaced by "*kā*", "*tumhārā*" (your) by "*tohār*", etc. However, the dialogues are not

attributed to characters from specific caste and class backgrounds, so that we are unable to identify the difference in register, unlike in *Śavyātrā*. Polarisation between the rich and the poor or higher and lower castes is thus not the major focus here, as the narrative space is allocated mostly to illustrating the predicament of small farmers in the village. Through their conversations with Tilesari, the reader learns that these villagers have experienced similar misfortunes such as joblessness and losing family members due to lack of proper medical treatment. By contrast, the rich farmers, land and factory owners, generally referred to as "*bābū*", seem much less affected. This comparison manifests itself in a subplot in which a boy tragically kills himself because the family is unable to afford his college fee and his place is taken by the son of a *bābū* through paid admission. Education, which is probably the only channel for the financially unprivileged to change their lives, also shuts them out.

In the end, we don't know the future of Tilesari's family or of the other villagers. This open ending resonates with the pessimistic tone set out in the very beginning: the poor have completely lost the hope to escape poverty. This story can be read as a "quasi-social record", infused with local traits, documenting the predicament in the village. The villagers are grappling with the adverse situation, which, as the open ending suggests, is unlikely to improve.

Maṁsā Baṛhaī

First published in 2002, *Maṁsā Baṛhaī* by Punni Singh shares the similar backdrop with *Tilesarī,* an era when rural petty commodity craftsmen have been floundering. Unlike Kushwaha's story which begins with Tilesari's family and then expands to include the tragic experiences of other individuals, this story is less interested in mapping out a big picture of agrarian predicament in the region and instead focuses exclusively on the character of Mansa, a village blacksmith. It

narrates the change in his life trajectory from the perspective of a first-person narrator who informs the way the village is represented and contributes to the characterisation of Mansa through an encounter mixed with flashbacks.

Maṁsā Baṛhaī does provide a caste signifier, but without overt caste hierarchy. In other words, the caste relation between the narrator, Punit, and Mansa is not the focus of the story. The narrative instead revolves around their relationship as old acquaintances—Mansa used to serve the village with his crafts and Punit went to school with his son Rajpal. But now, the encounter takes place during the narrator's visit to his family in the village from the city, a recurrent motif in several short stories examined in this chapter. The position of the narrator as a non-Dalit outsider, whose tie to the village is looser, imbues his perspective with nostalgia when perceiving the village. The opening description takes on an eerie overtone:

> *Ājkal gāṁv meṁ sardī kī śām apekṣākṛt kuch jaldī ā jātī hai — śām jaldī ā jātī hai aur āte-āte hī rāt meṁ tabdīl hone lagtī hai. Ab yahāṁ der rāt tak agihāne nahīṁ jalte, kisse-kahāniyaṁ nahiṁ kahe jāte. Kahiṁ ikkī-dukkī ḍholak bhī bajte nahiṁ sunī jā saktī. Koī umagakar gātā nahiṁ hai. Koī khulkar rotā nahiṁ hai. Yahāṁ rāt ke samay bhay aur ātaṅk, do cīzeṁ hī sarvavyāpī dekhī jā saktī haiṁ.* (178)
>
> These days the winter evening in the village comes rather fast—it does not take long before evening becomes night. There are neither burning stoves here in the late night, nor story-telling gatherings. Neither drum beats nor songs can be heard. No one cries loudly. There are only fear and terror here in the night, and they can be seen everywhere.

I read in the series of negatives in the quote an implication that in the past all these activities—burning stoves, story-telling gatherings, music and even sounds of cry—still existed in the village, and the village was a place infused with anything but fear and terror. Although the narrative has yet to reveal what is plaguing the village, this description sets the tone of discomfort, even horror. This feeling is reinforced by the instructions for the night given by the narrator's brother:

> *Kisī ke kuṇḍī khaṭakhaṭāne par darvāzā hargiz nahiṁ kholnā…lālṭen band nahiṁ karnī hai. Battī bhale hī nīcī kar lenā…* (178)
>
> Do not open the door whoever knocks… Do not put out the lantern, just dim the light.

All these prepare for the encounter with uncle Mansa, who unexpectedly creeps onto the verandah. At first, the narrator highlights his appearance—dressed in rags and missing three front teeth—indicating that this old man is suffering severe hardship. What surprises the narrator then, resonating with the eery ambience, is that Mansa actually comes to peddle handmade guns. And what is equally surprising—a detail that the narrative lays particular stress on—is that he sits at the foot end of the bed (*paitānā*) instead of sitting on the ground or standing, a choice contrary to the convention, and more importantly, articulating the eagerness to sell off the weapons. Mansa's present status and appearance make a marked contrast with what the narrator remembers from his childhood, when Mansa was the vigourously hardworking blacksmith serving the villagers. This is where the flashback comes in, punctuating the flow of the encounter. The comparison created by jumping back and forth between the present narrative time and the flashback arguably articulates the change in Mansa's life against the backdrop of shifting rural circumstances:

> *Maiṁ unheṁ chuṭpan se jāntā hūṁ…Ve jab bhī lohe ke kām se apnī "lohsārī" meṁ baiṭhte tab unheṁ tan-badan ki khabar nahiṁ rahtī thī…Isī tarah se jab ve lohsārī meṁ bhaṭṭhī par baiṭhe hote tab maiṁ dekhtā ki pighalane kī sīmā tak garm lohe ko kaisī niḍartā ke sāth ve saṛasī se pakaṛ kar bhaṭṭhī se uṭhāte haiṁ…Maiṁ dekhtā aur dekhtā hī rah jātā.* (179-180)
>
> I have known him since childhood…Whenever he was in the iron workshop, Mansa was so selflessly engrossed in his work… I also saw how he fearlessly took out the melting hot iron from the furnace with a pair of tongs … I would watch him and keep watching.

The quote and the use of the respectful plural pronoun *ve* suggests Mansa used to be a respected craftsman who was passionate and skilled in his occupation. Thanks to

this image of Mansa as a sincere and down-to-earth rural craftsman, though the narrator finds it hard to accept that he is now involved in the illicit business, the encounter loses the frightening tone of the story's opening. In order to persuade the narrator into buying the guns, Mansa addresses him "Punit, my boy!" (*Beṭā Punit*), an amiable gesture that indicates their close relationship in the past. Mansa is portrayed as someone Punit is familiar with. By embedding everyday scenes from the past in flashback, such as squabbles between Mansa and his wife, the narrative, I argue, constructs an image of Mansa that counters the one of a weapon dealer and prepares the reader for revelation of the reason behind Mansa's transformation.

Like the jobless potters in *Tilesari*, the turning of Mansa to a gun dealer from a diligent and committed craftsman is the result of changed economic circumstances, which the narrator sums up as follows:

> *Bād meṁ jab khetī-kisānī ke kām se hal-bailoṁ kā pattā sāf ho rahā thā aur ṭyūbail-ṭraikṭar kā yug prārambh ho rahā thā tabhī maṁsārām baṛhaī ke hunar kī kadr ghaṭne lagī thī. Uske bād unkī lohsārī meṁ bhaṭṭhī kabhī-kabhī dahaktī thī…jaise-jaise samay bīttā jā rahā thā vaise hī vaise hālat aur bhī zyādā bigaṛtī jā rahī thī. Ab maṁsā cācā ko khāne ke lāle paṛe the. Ve ek borī meṁ halke auzār rakhkar gāṁv-gāṁv aur galī-galī pherī lagāne lage the. Baṛī kaṭhināī ke din the. Pūre-pūre din gāṁv aur galiyoṁ ke cakkar lagāne paṛte, phir bhī do jūn culhā nahiṁ jal pātā. Laṛkā ghar choṛkar calā gayā thā aur gaṇgāpur valī mahāgarībī ke din kāṭ rahī thī.* (182)
>
> Later, when plough-bull gradually lost their appeal for cultivation and the age of the tubewell-tractor began, Mansa's skills started to lose value. The furnace in his workshop only burned occasionally…The situation deteriorated as time went by. Now Mansa had to worry about food. He took a sack filled with tools wandering from village to village, from lane to lane. They were very difficult days. Although he did all this, it was not enough to get two meals for a day. His son left home and his wife from Gangapur led a life of dire poverty.

Mansa tried to make a living with traditional skills, but they had become obsolete. This quote is the only reference to the broad economic context in the story. Unlike *Tilesarī,* in which where the narrator details how marketisation has adversely

impacts the rural economy, here, the narrative instead highlights Mansa's personal experience instead of offering a broader critique. The different narrators and approaches lead to different angles of representation. Whereas in *Tilesarī* the third-person narrator provided a realistic portrayal with a reporter's gaze, here the first-person perspective produces a more direct and intimate involvement in Mansa's situation.

As the story approaches its end, the narrator comes to feel even more empathy towards Mansa, who is now sitting in front of him and looks again like swami Ramakrishna, an impression of Mansa left on the narrator when he was a child. It ends with Mansa leaving the verandah after failing to persuade the narrator into buying the guns. The act of selling guns, I suggest, is decrimialised in this context and has become a symbolic response to the forces that has gauged a deep wound in rural economy.

The Village Chronotope in Two Short Stories

I want to conclude this chapter by examining two stories that are organised around two village chronotopes, respectively of the road and the *alāo* (open fire). In other texts in this thesis we have seen that e.g. the Dalit *bastī* or the village market serve as sites that push characters to behave in certain ways and as grounds for tensions that initiate or propel the plots. In short texts, a single spatial coordinate can structure an entire text and control the narrative pace. My two final examples show how other chronotopes operate. The narrative of Hari Bhatnagar's *Kāmyāb* is built around a road trip of the unnamed first-person urban narrator to the village. Evoking Bakhtin's road chronotope, the trip is filled with unexpected encounters which push the plot forward and reshape the way the village is perceived by the narrator. My analysis shows how the road operates as the key chronotopic motif in the story,

animating both narrative time as well as space. Vasudev's *Māgh kī rāt*, as one can tell from the title, is inspired by Premchand's short story *Pūs kī rāt* (January Night), in which the *alāo* played the crucial role. In this story, the *alāo* not only provides warmth in the freezing winter but also functions as a space for people to mix. My analysis suggests how changes in the *alāo* mark changes in the narrative pace of the short story as well as in the destiny of the characters.

Kāmyāb

The very short *Kāmyāb* (literally means successful) by Hari Bhatnagar is an intriguing and unusual story as far as the theme is concerned. The plot is simple: a journey with various encounters of an urban male figure on his way to the village. The thematic particularity of this story lies in its resemblance to what Bakhtin talks in his theory about the chronotope of the road, wherein the protagonists go through various unexpected encounters in the course of their journey.[1] This story invites a particular interpretation of the chronotope of the road. Told from by a first-person narrator, it creates a sense of intimacy, as if the reader is on the same journey with the narrator/protagonist. The protagonist is an outsider, who for the first time after several decades, on his way to the village to buy a plot of land on which a factory is going to be built. His perspective is presented directly: the village is as much an unfamiliar space to the protagonist as it is to the reader. The opening paragraph gives some hints regarding his forward-looking and determined personality and sets a light-hearted, even joyful tone that contrasts with what is about to happen:

> *Kuśal parvatārohī palaṭkar pīche nahiṁ dekhtā. Na hī agal-bagal. Agal-bagal dekhtā bhī hai to usmeṁ ḍūbtā khotā nahiṁ. Uske dimāg meṁ sirf manzil hotī hai aur vah uskī taraf baṛhtā jātā hai. Hāth meṁ uske moṭe-moṭe dāstāne hote haiṁ. Pair meṁ mazabūt jute. Sir yā badan is tarah lapeṭe rakhtā hai ki rāste kī bādhā chū*

[1] Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel', 243–44.

na sake. Kahne kā matlab yah ki apne ko vah itnā mūnd letā hai ki pahāṛī jharne kī marmar use na āhlādit kar pātī hai aur na barf kī chātī meṁ dabī sard āh udās! Takarīban aise hī libāsoṁ meṁ maiṁ bhī thā. Aur maṅzil kī tarf baṛh rahā thā. Lekin parvat kā śikhar merī maṅzil na thī. Merī manzil kuber kā dhan pānā thā aur is diśā meṁ maiṁ lagātār kāmyāb hotā jā rahā thā. (54)

A skillful mountaineer does not turn back or look around. Even though he does look around, he does not lose himself in it. There is only the destination in his mind and he keeps on going towards it. With thick gloves and sturdy shoes, he covers his head and body in such a way that he cannot touch any obstacle down the road. That is to say, he shuts himself so much that neither can the mountain waterfalls delight him, nor can the cold sigh buried in the snow make him sad. I was also in the same clothes, going towards the destination. But the peak was not my destination. My destination was to earn money from the god of wealth Kuber and I had been successful in this.

From now on come the encounters, which will transform him completely. The first encounter takes place on the bus, where the protagonist gets the first unpleasant impression of the village from his follow travelers, who are villagers.

Majbūrī meṁ maiṁ kharkharātī bas meṁ baiṭhā jismeṁ sūkhe-saṛe aur moṭe gande, cikaṭ kapaṛoṁ meṁ lipaṭe kisān-mazadūr ṭhaṅse the jo cīkhate-cillāte hue ek-dūsare se batiyā-maskharā rahe the … lekin is vakt aṭkī meṁ thā, bas meṁ ek aisī gandh thī jo takarīban basahe se uṭhtī hai aur lagtā thā jaise bas meṁ bakaroṁ ko caṛhā diyā gayā ho. Gandh itnī tīkhī thī ki nāk par maiṁ rūmāl jamāe thā aur use bacne ke lie sir khiṛkī se bāhar nikāle thā. Lekin bagal meṁ caṛhā bikhare bāloṁ vālā mazadūr jo kisī cūnā-bhaṭṭhe meṁ kām karne vālā lagtā thā, mujhe itne par bhī cain nahiṁ detā thā aur bār-bār mere ūpar auṁdh paṛtā thā … man hotā ki sabko salīkā sikhā dūṁ, rauṁ ḍālūṁ, lekin aisā sambhav nahiṁ thā. (55)

Helplessly I sat on the rattling bus together with those rough, unkind, fat and dirty peasants and workers in tattered oily clothes who shouted at one another…The bus stopped juts then. Inside it a goat-like smell was caught as if a goat was brought on-board. The smell was so strong that I had to cover my nose with a handkerchief and stick my head out of the window… A stoker-like person with disheveled hair sitting by my side kept upsetting me without giving me any peace. Should it be possible, I would teach them all what good disposition is and trample them underfoot.

The description, characterised by unpleasant elements, reveals his negative perception, while at the same time, the narrative time slows down. When the bus stops, so does the time. The character's next encounter is with a rickshaw puller. Although the rickshaw does not meet his criteria of what a rickshaw should be like, he has no choice but to take the ride, or he would have to walk to the village. But as soon as the character is ready to pay whatever the demanded price, the rickshaw puller suddenly stands up and leaves, saying:

> *Tumhāre jaise khūn cūsne vāloṁ ko rikśe par nahiṁ baiṭhātā! Bhūīṁ-māṭī par baiṭhane vale hī is par jagah pāte haiṁ.* (55-56)
>
> Blood-suckers like you cannot sit on the rickshaw. Only those who sit on the ground can sit on it.

This quote, and the rickshawala's unusual decision to refuse a customer, reverse the protagonist's gaze and perception about the villagers previously on the bus. Now he's the object of the rickshawala's gaze, and given his refusal our protagonist has to get to the village on foot. As the he walks along the road, time begins to slowly move forward again. Even though at a very slow pace, the character begins to experience it less unpleasantly. He has now entered an open space of the rural landscape which provides more possibilities than in the bus boxing people inside:

> *Sāmne dhūl bharī kaccī saṛak thī. Agal-bagal hare-bhare khet. Kināroṁ par sūkhī kaṁṭīlī jhaṇḍiyāṁ. Unke gird bhurbhurī zamīn thī aur baṛe-baṛe khoh the manoṁ inmeṁ siyār rahte hoṁ. Kadam-kadam par mor the, cīkhte hue. Bagaloṁ kī pāt thī maveśiyoṁ ke pīche caltī huī … kisānoṁ ke bojhā paṭakne yā lakaṛī cīrne yā pur calāne vale kisānoṁ ke bardhoṁ ko hāṁkne kī āvāz bahut maddhim thī. ṭhaṇḍī havā cal rahī thī aur bahut acchā lag rahā thā.* (56)
>
> In front was a dusty dirt track. Green fields were everywhere. There were dry and forked bushes on both sides. Around them was crumbly soil with large holes. There might be jackals living in them. Peacocks could be seen howling. Herons walked after the cattle… Peasants could be seen discharging cargo and sawing logs. The voice of some peasants driving oxen back to the village was moderate. A cool breeze blew, and I was feeling very good.

The character's mood changes significantly as places switch. In the open field the protagonist for the first time experiences the countryside as a positive space. This is before the story's most important encounter, between the protagonist and a donkey which is giving birth and a monkey trying to protect the donkey. The unforeseenness of the scene fits the main characteristic of the road chronotope. The donkey is vulnerable and in pain, due to its current state, whereas the monkey is fiercely protective and even aggressive when the protagonist tries to come close, thinking that he may help. But as he takes a step further towards the donkey, suddenly the monkey attacks him. He stops trying to move close and witnesses at a distance the birth of a baby donkey. The story ends with the protagonist's reflection upon what has happened in front of his eyes:

> *Bandar ne mujhe apne ghar meṁ āne kyoṁ nahiṁ diyā? Yah vicar yakāyak mujhe taṅg karne lagā aur pahlī bār maiṁ dukh meṁ ḍūbā. Aur is kadar ki sine meṁ dard hone lagā. Minisṭar ke pās jāne kī icchā sūkh gaī thī. Maiṁ ro rahā thā. Mere āṁsū poṁcanevālā koī na thā.* (58)
>
> Why did not the monkey let me into its home? The thought suddenly started to trouble me and for the first time I sank into such sorrow that I could feel a pain in my chest. The desire of visiting the Minister dried up. I was crying. Nobody came to wipe my tears.

After so many encounters and a complete reversal of subject position—from confident mountaineer to helpless onlooker—the protagonist finally encounters with himself. The protective monkey may serve as a metaphorical symbol of the nature of the village, which counters the protagonist's conquering ambition illustrated in the beginning. This story is a good example to show how a single chronotope operates in a narrative, with unexpected encounters pushing forward the plot and helping with characterisation. Time and space are intrinsically linked, and as space changes, time also does: the time in the bus is quite different from that in the road and when facing

the rickshawala, and the monkey and the donkey. Moreover, the encounters the protagonist experience could also be read as the encounter between the two big chronotopes—the chronotope of the city and the chronotope of the village, with the main character the bearer of the urban chronotope. When entering the unfamiliar rural domain, the protagonist continuously gets "defeated" by the different dimensions of the village.

Māgh kī Rāt

Finally, Vasudev's short story *Māgh kī Rāt* (*February Night*, 2004) is another example of how a chronotope can inform both space and time, plot and character in a text. From the title one immediately knows that this tale pays homage to Premchand's famous short story *Pūs kī Rāt* (January night), in which a farmer watching his fields at night only has a dog for company once the open fire dies out.[1] The story's main elements, such as the fierce coldness, the open fire and the dog, also appear in the *Māgh kī Rāt*, which comes out as a contemporary rewrite of Premchand's piece with new thematic and structural configurations. It also follows social realist representation of *Pūs kī Rāt,* whose narrative power lies mainly in the portrayal of the everyday suffering of unprivileged ordinary characters, but also in the blurring between the man and the dog.

The story revolves around an old man, Ramsarup, a father of three daughters living with his youngest girl. They depend upon each other for survival. The dowries for his other daughters' marriages have landed the family in devastating poverty, resulting in lack of food. The narrative spans a winter night—as the saying goes, Febrary is a tiger (*māgh bāgh hotā hai*, 209)—whose icy coldness only magnifies hunger, and their dilapidated house protects them from neither gale-force wind nor

[1] Premchand, 'Pūs Kī Rāt', in *Grāmy Jīvan Kī Kahāniyāṁ* (Banaras: Sarasvati Press, 1948).

torrential rain. As the third-person ironically puts it: "the poor live closer to the nature (*garīb-jan prakriti ke zyādā karīb hote haiṁ na*, 208)". In order to survive the freezing winter night, Ramsarup has to sleep beside an open fire (*alāo*), which apart from serving as the source of warmth in the winter days, also attracts people to assemble in the dark, and therefore becomes as a place of socialisation. Unlike the road chronotope in *Kāmyāb*, where unexpected encounters affect the character's feeling of time, the open fire lightly resembles Bakhtin's conceptualisation of the chronotope of salons and parlors, where "*dialogues* happen, something that acquires extraordinary importance in the novel, revealing the character, 'idea' and passion of the heroes".[1] Given the stratification in the village along lines of caste and class, the open fire as a place for social interaction marks boundaries between people of different social backgrounds. Unlike the salons and parlors, the fire thus takes on double functions of both gathering and separating people, and this characteristic is revealed in early part of the story:

> *Gāṁv meṁ bramh sthān ke pās rāmsarūp kā aur pīpal ke peṛ ke pās bujhāvan kā alāo lagtā hai. Gāṁv meṁ vaise to aur ḍher sāre alāo lagte haiṁ, kintu in donoṁ alāvoṁ kī viśeṣ carcā rahtī hai …Yadyapi bujhāvan aur rāmsarūp ke alāo meṁ antar hai. Bujhāvan kā alāo peṭ bhar khā lene ke bād ghaṛī-do ghaṛī tak hāth-pāṁv seṅkane ke lie hai. Hāṁ śām ke vakt gāṁv ke kuch netā ṭāip log gappe mārte zarūr āte haiṁ. Yadi gāṁv-javār kī tāzā khabareṁ mālūm karnī ho, to āp bujhāvan ke alāo ke pās ghaṛī bhar ke lie cale jāie. Malūm ho jāeṁgī.*
>
> *Lekin rāmsarūp ke alāo ke pās vaisī koi carcā nahiṁ hotī. Vahāṁ vaise log āte hī nahiṁ. Kyoṁki is tarah kī bātoṁ meṁ uskī koī ruci nahiṁ hotī. Islie uskā alāo aise logoṁ kā aḍḍā nahiṁ ban pātā. Balki uskā alāo to uske hāth-pāṁv aur śrīr ko hī garm nahiṁ rakhtā, apitu peṭ ko bhī garm rakhtā hai. Eslie uskā alāv kuch jyādā hī damdār aur ṭikāū hotā hai. Rāt bhar rahne vālā, vah baṛī mehnat se alāo lagātā hai.* (209-210)
>
> Ramsarup's bonfire is located at the sacred place of the village and Bujhavan's is under the pipal tree. There are other open fires in the village but these two are particularly talked about … But there is

[1] See Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel', 246. The stress on "dialogues" is in the original.

> difference between them. Bujhavan's bonfire is for people to warm their hand-foot for some time after a full meal. Yes, in the evening some leader type people of the village come to gossip. If you want to fresh news of the village, then you should come to Bujhavan's for a while. You will know.
>
> But there is no this kind of talk at Ramsarup's bonfire. No people like that come. Because he is not into that kind of topics. So they cannot make a base here. His fire is not only for warming the body, but also for warming the stomach. It is thus more vigorous and stronger, lasting the whole night. He makes every effort to keep the fire.

As the two bonfires take on different social traits, the time associated with the physical entities also becomes palpable and is contrasted. Bujhavan's fire serves a recreational purpose and does not last long, whereas the for Ramsarup the bonfire is critical to his well-being and has to be strong and endurable. The overnight duration takes on narrative force as it provides not only the essential ground for the lengthy dialogues between Ramsarup and his friend Habib to develop, but also interacts with the weather, which becomes colder as time elapses and eventually causes the tragic death of the protagonist at the end of the story.

After the initial comparison, the story focuses on the dialogues between the two friends. Their conversations are rambling, and topics range from domestic issues to communal tension. Habib complains about his mistreatment by his daughter-in-law, whereas Ramsarup curses the ill fortune of having three daughters, whose dowries have produced the present severe impoverishment, in which he has to endure hunger to save food for his pregnant daughter. Neither can make any change to the situation and they are watching time rather than acting in it. As they become silent after every heavy-hearted topic, time slows down and the open fire comes to the foreground:

> *Rāmsarūp cup ho jātā hai, habīb se bhī kuch bolā nahiṁ jātā. Vah cupcāp alāo kī āg ko lakaṛī se khodane lagtā hai. Phir khodate-khodate hī kahtā hai, "aj to alāo bhī bhī kamjor hai. Lagtā hai, rāt bhar nahiṁ calegā. Kaise rāt …? […] Alāo ṭhik rahtā, tab to koī*

> *bāt nahiṁ thī. Par āj ke alāo meṁ to koī jān hī nahiṁ hai … khair bhagavān mālik hai. Vah jaisā cāhegā, rakhegā, hamārā kyā?"* (213)
>
> Ramsarup has become silent, Habib also cannot say anything. He quietly probes the fire with a stick. Meanwhile, he says, "the fire today is also weak. It seems it will last the whole night. What a night …? […] If the fire were fine, there would not be any issue. But today there is no life in it … God is the boss. If he wants this, what can we do?"

The quote reveals that the *alāo* draws the characters' attention when a narrative gap emerges. It therefore also plays the role of an organising knot when the plot slows down or takes a turn. Moreover, the narrator attaches the open fire to a symbolic meaning, whose lack of strength and intensity links to Ramsarup's aged and weak body. The two are closely associated in this extremely freezing weather; if the fire cannot be kept burning fiercely, his life is likely to be compromised. At the same time, the *alāo* creates an unresolvable tension between them: the lack of fuel compels Ramsarup to consume more straw for the fire, which he also needs to cover his body. Here we see that the *alāo* as a chronotopic motif informs the development of the plot and the character's fate.

As their conversation resumes, the topic expands to encompass other issues, including grievances against local officials who are accused to have embezzled the subsidy for the poor. When Habib brings up the ongoing communal hatred, Ramsarup's philosophical explanation that it is a conspiracy organised by some fevered people is beyond Habib's understanding. Clearly, the tension has nothing to do with their harmonious friendship. The topic moves again to the misfortune of a skillful cultivator, jailed after envious villagers have fabricated charges against him. As the two characters both become buried in grief due to the tragic case, the narrator again draws the reader's attention to the fire and the surroundings, this time marking an end to their conversation:

> *Alāo ke pās ek udās stabdhatā phir se chā jātī hai. Ab tak brahm bābā ke pattoṁ kī sarsarāhaṭ dogunī ho jātī hai. Pachiyā havā tez jo bahane lagī hai.* (216)
>
> The bonfire is covered by a gloomy stillness. Now the rustling sound of brahm baba's leaves has become twice louder. The west wind is blowing fast.

After Habib leaves, attracted by the fire, a stray dog comes to keep Ramswarup company, evoking the scene in Premchand's story.[1] Making the two the narrative focus in the second half of the story, the narrator plays with the coldness and the *alāo*, which now needs more fuel to keep both Ramsarup and the dog warm; he runs out of the straw even before midnight. In this predicament, time also seems to freeze, and the narrative becomes filled with Ramsarup's mental activity, his deep concern over the dog and his daughter, who is obliged to share the same difficulty. In contrast to Premchand's story in which the protagonist manages to survive the coldness in the January night, Ramsarup's death at the end makes the story a harsher representation of how the poor have to suffer in the village.

Conclusion

In addition to the novel, the short story continues to constitute an important genre in contemporary Hindi village writing, closely linked to the popularity of Hindi literary magazines, which still act as the major platform for many new and established writers to publish their works. Given the comparatively rich and variegated corpus of Hindi writing on the village, it seems misleading to argue that the rural theme has been marginalised in Hindi literature, as the editor of the collection *Kathā meṁ Gāṁv* claims. In fact, what the collection does is to consolidate the impression of the vitality of literary representations of the village.

[1] See Premchand, 'Pūs Kī Rāt'.

I actually began my thesis with *Kathā meṁ Gāṁv* before turning to the novels, and the collection helped me navigate through the large corpus of Hindi rural short narratives. As the stories I analyse in this chapter have shown, the agrarian crisis, caste and gender are also the three dominant lenses in contemporary short story writing about the village just as they are in the novels. Like the novels, the short stories tend to have strong female agents as the main characters. While *Muṭṭhī meṁ Gāṁv*, a tale combining gender with caste, conforms to the gendered characterisation characterised by assertive female characters and ineffective male counterparts, *Būṛhī* instead focused on ageing, bringing a new theme. Many contemporary rural short stories are concerned with inter-caste dynamics, as we have seen. While *Viṣbel* describes the spiral of violence in the armed conflict between the two different castes, *Śavyātrā*, by comparison, offers an insightful observation of discrimination and its deadly consequences also between different Dalit castes. Narrativising the drastic economic decline in non-agricultural employment, both *Tilesarī* and *Maṁsā Baṛhaī* focus on the conundrum rural petty product producers face, with different narrative strategies. While *Tilesarī* expands its narrative scope to document the history of a whole district, *Maṁsā Baṛhaī* focuses on a single character, recounting how economic changes impact his traditional occupation. Finally, my examinations of *Kāmyāb* and *Māgh kī Rāt* have demonstrated how the road and the open fire can be counted as key elements in the chronotope of the village and play a crucial role respectively in plot development and characterisation.

Compared with the novels I have previously examined, the short stories allow the writers to experiment with a wider range of themes, as we have seen in, for instance, *Būṛhī* and *Śavyātrā*. They also show stronger intertextuality with Premchand. While the confrontation of Mangli with the upper-caste in *Muṭṭhī meṁ Gāṁv* evokes *Ṭhākur kā Kuāṁ* and demonstrates more assertiveness and coverage,

Māgh kī Rāt, paying homage to Premchand's story, has a harsher ending. In both the novels and the short stories, there are cases where local registers are employed to achieve a strong effect of localness. Most of the novels tend to offer the potential for the village to tackle the problems, whereas in *Tilesarī* and *Maṁsā Baṛhāī* the stories end without giving an "imaginary resolution".

Concluding Remarks

Following the path of social scientific studies which has highlighted new trends and problems of the Indian village under the impact of economic liberalisation, this thesis has drawn critical attention back to the village in contemporary Hindi literature. Exploring the representation of the rural imaginary, it has sought to make a scholarly intervention in the study of Hindi village writing, which has so far largely revolved around Premchand and regionalism. I have attempted to show how contemporary Hindi texts about the village employ multiple genres and forms, including extensive family sagas, detailed political dramas, idealistic tales, episodic novels and pithy short stories, to represent different views towards rural subjects and the rural world. The fact that village writing does not conform to any single formal paradigm testifies its dynamism in the contemporary Hindi literary arena.

In the light of the richness and strength of contemporary village writing in Hindi that this thesis showcases, the idea of the "marginalised village" invites further reflection. With the process of economic liberalisation and intensified urbanisation, the village tends to be viewed as cast aside in the wake of dramatic social change, and hopelessly mired in caste oppression and economic underdevelopment, a perception that we find in the representations of the north Indian village in recent English-language novels. *The White Tiger* (2008), for instance, following the paradigm of the "two-Indias", describes village India simply as "the darkness", bogged down in unmitigated underdevelopment and corruption, in contrast with the fast-growing metropolitan India of "light", characterised by rapid wealth, technology

and knowledge.[1] Already *A Suitable Boy* (1993) offered a similar description of the 1950s village as an entirely oppressive and dismal space.[2] Reinforcing the hierarchical urban-rural dichotomy, in this type of representational marginalisation the village is perceived not only from an metro-centric perspective, but also with high level of prejudice. Yet in the Hindi literary field, such excessive simplification and generalisation—which reduce the village to sheer darkness for an urban audience assumedly living in the "light"—is not the mainstream representation, as we saw in the chapters. My study has argued against the impression that rural themes are marginalised in contemporary Hindi literature. Against the backdrop of intensified globalisation and urbanisation, there is still a comparatively rich and variegated corpus of writing on the village in Hindi, exploring political, caste, and economic struggles.

It is hard to dwell on literary representations without noting some connections with other discourses on the village, as Hindi village writing has tended to negotiate reality through the prism of realism. My study has shed light on the fact that Hindi literary representations of the village have evolved in tandem with the social scientific imaginations from the colonial period to the present. But while colonial thinkers tended to conceptualise the village as "republics", a construct Gandhi also embraced, Premchand instead dwelled on the problems of rural society in his narratives with a social realist approach, departing from his earlier optimistic worldview. After the establishment of the new nation state, both anthropologists and Hindi writers broke away from the "book view" of the village and instead sought to discover and imagine the Indian village with an "ethnographic gaze". And in contrast to Premchand's social realism, regionalist writers, Renu in particular, replaced the

[1] Aravind Adiga, *The White Tiger: A Novel* (Simon and Schuster, 2008), 14.
[2] See Vikram Seth, *A Suitable Boy* (Penguin Books India, 1994). For an examination of the representation of the rural world in this novel, see Eyre, 'Land, Language and Literary Identity'.

harshness of rural life with abundant local cultural elements, instilling playfulness in their writings and offering a joyful reading experience marked by strong orality.

In the contemporary era defined by economic liberalisation and globalisation, developmental discourses have registered new traits in the Indian village, including i.e. the absence of landlords and the stable entry of state institutions in rural life, a redefined urban-rural equation thanks to people's mobility, the detrimental effects of capital and globalisation on the rural economy, and reconfigured local caste, gender and communal power relations after low-caste assertion. The SOAS village restudy project has also concluded that the current configuration of rural life, characterised by its exploitative attribute and intensified competition for resources, raises question about the village as a livable space or doomed to a bleak future. Contemporary Hindi village writing resonates with the findings in the social sciences, but at the same time registers its own traits. My thesis has argued that shifting gender dynamics, reshaped caste and Dalit politics, and the ongoing agrarian crisis are the major thematic tropes in today's Hindi village texts. By contrast, out-migration and communal conflict, although attracting considerable attention in social scientific discourse, do not register as strongly in Hindi village narratives. Therefore, my study has shown how thematic matters move across different discursive domains, but also how literary texts, thanks to their particular perspective, narrativisation, and imagery, offer an alternative public commentary and can shape—or challenge—the way in which the rural world is currently imagined.

Moreover, my examination has also shown that Hindi village writing of today shows both continuities and discontinuities with the tradition of representing rural subjects in Hindi literature. While almost all texts but one have inherited the realist style originating with Premchand, they tend to focus on subject matters that demonstrate strong engagement with this era as well as new representational

strategies. For instance, I have shown that contemporary representations of rural Dalits significantly depart from Premchand and highlight instead their assertiveness in confronting humiliation and exploitation meted out by the high-caste and echoing the ongoing Dalit mobilisation and politicisation. Some texts also seek to achieve localness by inserting local cultural and linguistic elements, though regionalism is no longer an evident trend as it was in the 1950s and '60s. Instead, in some cases, the employment of strong dialects is intentionally reduced to facilitate an easier reading experience for the targeted urban readership. Orality and playfulness, a characteristic trait of Renu's village writing, no longer feature in contemporary Hindi rural texts.

While exploring contemporary literary representations, this study has drawn upon the division of *Vertretung* and *Darstellung* to consider both the writers/narrators' representativeness and positionality and the narratological elements that structure their representations. I have argued that while contemporary Hindi writers writing extensively on the village are based in cities, their continuing connection with the rural world has strengthened their authority and confidence to represent the village. It is also true that in some cases they view the village as outsiders and display an "ethnographic gaze". Through portraying exploitation, distress and agrarian crisis, contemporary rural texts also demand empathy and solidarity from the reader as the first step to tackle the ills in the rural world. My examination has also confirmed that the writers/narrators' gender and caste identities do inform the ways in which rural subjects are represented. Writing from a feminist perspective, Maitreyi Pushpa, for instance, allocates much greater narrative space to delineate the inner world of female characters, and presents them as successful agents as opposed to failed male characters. I have also shown divergent narrative strategies in the portrayals of Dalit characters in the two Dalit-oriented novels, complicating the paradigm of "good Dalits and bad Brahmins".

Drawing upon Bakhtin's conceptualisation of the "chronotope", this study has proposed a village chronotope in contemporary Hindi narratives consisting of key spatial coordinates that structure the plot and inform characterisation. I have identified the road, the *alāo*, the Dalit *bastī*, the doorway, the *thekā*, the police station and the market road, etc. as the main chronotopic spatial motifs in contemporary Hindi rural texts. While some spatial motifs are consistent across various texts, such as the road that helps develop character arcs and the site of encounters, others perform varied roles in different texts—the police station, as I have shown, acts as a space of pure humiliation and exploitation for the Kabutaras in *Almā Kabūtarī*, whereas in *Tarpaṇ* the low-caste group manages to avail itself of its power to prevent their upper-caste rivals from taking reckless actions. In addition to its narrative functions, the chronotope also serves as a link that demonstrates the inner connections between the texts and brings them together under a single framework.

Finally, arguing against the utopia/dystopia dichotomy, my thesis has shown that most representations of the village should be positioned in between. While the representations of the village in the texts I examine do not shy away from violence, exploitation, and injustice, they tend not to leave the impression that the village is, and will remain, a dystopian space. Rather, they point towards the dynamic forces at play in the village that produce a more mixed picture. In some case, they provide an "imaginary resolution" to the problems, seeking to defend prolonged existence of the village.

Although I have presented in this thesis a thorough examination of representations of the village in contemporary Hindi literature, the exploration into such representations in an era of such dramatic socio-economic change should not stop here. Further studies, I suggest, could benefit from three sets of broader

comparison. First, although some of the texts I have examined indicate the continuities existing between rural and urban spheres, whether it's in the neoliberal economic impact or the mobility of people across spatial domains, we still need to see whether changes in social relations in the urban sphere follow a similar or different pattern from the village. I have demonstrated that caste and gender politics play a crucial role in today's Hindi village writing. Does this also apply to Hindi texts focusing on the urban domain? If so, how do gender and caste dymamics play out? In what ways, for instance, does caste affect the everday life of urban residents, though it may not spiral into an organised caste war as in rural texts? Second, it would be useful to compare the representation of the rural world across Indian literature in other languages. I have mentioned earlier that Indian English writing tends to imagine the village as mired in corruption, violence, exploitation and darkness. What about other regional languages? Does the village also hold a significant status in, say, contemporary Marathi or Tamil literature? Do these literatures also tend to register the dramatic socio-economic change in the rural world? Third, future studies could explore the village in the context of world literature, possibly through juxtaposing Hindi village writing with rural texts in other Asian literatures. Taking into consideration my personal background, it would be intriguing to see how contemporary Chinese prose narratives approach the dramatic transformations affectng the rural world in China. Do Chinese writers also tend to defend the prolonged the existence of the village, as Hindi writers, do given that the "hollowing-out" of the village is happening at a cracking pace in China as well?

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