CHAPTER FOUR

CRITIQUING CASTE

> Caste defines the core of Indian tradition, and it is seen today as the major threat to Indian modernity. If we are to understand India properly, and by implication if we are to understand India's other core symbol—Hinduism—we mustunderstand caste, whether we admire or revile it. (Dirks 3)

> Caste may no longer convey a sense of community that confers civilizational identity to the Indian subcontinent, but it is still the primary form of local identity and, in certain contexts, from Dalits to Brahmans, translates the local into recognizably subcontinental idioms of association far more powerful than any other single category of community. (7)

This chapter examines the representation of caste hierarchies in India and the contemporary transformation of caste and caste-based hegemony through a study of novels like *Untouchable*, *A Fine Balance*, *The God of Small Things, Sea of Poppies* and *The Hungry Tide***.** The chapter shows how caste which has been the traditional tool of oppression has emerged as a counter of resistance in contemporary India where the so-called lower castes choose to combine under the umbrella term *dalit* to question their oppression. It is shown that while caste and class denominations within a structure of hegemonic control or actual dominance has prevailed in Indian society from pre-colonial times, it is only under British rule that the caste system gained prominence as a means of social stratification and control.

Given the overarching presence of caste in any understanding of Indian society—whether social, economic, sociological, literary-critical or epistemological—it makes sense to map the link between caste and ideology in contemporary India. Caste is at once a social construct and an ideological apparatus. In a statement that sums up the link between caste and ideology, Diane Mines says: "Caste is always a work in progress—subtle, shifting, argued, and indefinite" (*Caste* 32). It does not mean that one can move from one caste to another but rather from one caste narrative to another. It can be argued that caste is not so much a social-anthropological explanation of one's position in the social hierarchy of India as a narrative of one's origin and link to the world. Every explanation of caste is a narrative of social genealogy and social stratification. This is close to what Terry Eagleton says about the mystery of all origins: "the ideology will be

internally inflected in such a way as to confer a partial invisibility on its productive matrix. In this sense, there is a limited analogy between the ideological and the pathological: both kinds of discourse must be read symptomatically for that repression of their formative processes of which they are the product" ("Ideology" 64).

The key term in Eagleton's formulation of the 'ideological' is 'productive matrix'. In other words, the key to every form of belief is one's explanation of the originary forms of existence and one's place therein. It is also useful to recall here that the Indian term for caste is *jāti. Jāti* is derived from the Sanskrit word *jāta* (born or brought into being) or *jatha* (womb). In both cases the word is simply a trope of foregrounding of origins and embryonic attachments. As Fredric Jameson says of ideology, it is more in line with one's political unconscious rather than false belief. For only in the former does one have the licence to carry a belief that cannot be sustained by logical, scientific or historical scrutiny. So what we call caste is actually a narrative key to a moment or a series of moments of self-fashioning in the life of a group of individuals who share a common occupational or geographical link. *Jāti* is therefore a life-world narrative that carries in its wake narratives of a community's relationship to the world it inhabits. To the extent that other communities would have narratives that explain their own productive matrices, *jati* narratives are exercises in claiming exclusive spaces for oneself and identifying spaces for others.

The chapter examines the contention put forward by Dirks about the caste system gaining prominence in India under colonial rule. While the caste system existed in India from ancient times, the structure of discrimination based on a hierarchy with the Brahmins at the top was endorsed by the British. Under this system the Brahmins were allowed to determine privileges and rights of occupation and social space for themselves and others in colonial India. Since caste ranks were fixed on the basis of the occupations pursued by its members, people performing undesirable jobs because of the occupations allotted to their caste, were seen as the lowest in the caste structure and deemed untouchable. These so called untouchables were totally marginalised by society and had to live with abuse and harassment from the members of the upper classes on a daily basis. Some of the novels addressing this problem show how these low caste people were

not only ill treated in society but also oppressed in such a manner that they are in danger of losing the ability to articulate.

This chapter is premised on the following contentions that inform the growth of the novel in India:

a. Given that fixing of caste based occupations is a means of social exploitation, caste has been a means of social oppression and social division;
b. that the caste system which is a part of Hindu society, is conveniently used by other sects to control and oppress people;
c. that colonial and independent governments use the caste stratification and discrimination as an administrative tool;
d. that caste and class boundaries are not absolute but fluid to some extent.

These contentions are tested with the help of illustrations from each of the following texts. While each text presents a different set of circumstances, a common thread running through all of them is the oppression of lower caste people in strange and ingenious ways.

Untouchable

In his novel, *Untouchable* (1935), Mulk Raj Anand focuses on the atrocities of the caste system, the untold sufferings of the downtrodden at the hands of the native caste Hindus (upper caste Hindus) who are guided by an irrational ideology. The novel is set in the early part of the twentieth century, when the Indian society was passing through a transitory phase at a historical juncture with the British still ruling India. On the one hand, the society still faces the hegemony of Brahminical ideology of purity and pollution while on the other, it witnesses the emergence of new ideological strands that not only questions the very credibility of Brahminical ideology but also strongly condemns and opposes caste-based discrimination and exploitation.

Untouchable sharply mirrors how, on the pretext of religion and tradition, the upper castes ruthlessly exploit the so-called "low castes" or "outcastes" and make them socially as well as economically powerless. The caste Hindus deliberately deprive the outcastes from such necessities as water, hygiene, fair wage, and education, and thus forcefully

and systematically degrade them to subhuman stature. This extreme exploitation of the outcastes builds the very base of the novel.

Untouchable is the story depicting a day in the life of an eighteen year old, strong and able-bodied, untouchable boy, Bakha, who is required to be a toilet cleaner, a sweeper, because of the caste he inherits by birth. In the beginning of the novel Anand describes how Bakha, and other outcastes are made to live in the outcastes' colony comprising mud-walled houses clustered together in two rows, outside, and separated from, the town and the Army Cantonment:

> There lived the scavengers, the leather workers, the washermen, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grass-cutters and other outcastes from Hindu society. A brook ran near the lane, once with crystal-clear water, now soiled by the dirt and filth of the public latrines situated about it, the odour of the hides and skins of dead carcases left to dry on its banks, the dung of donkeys, sheep, horses, cows and buffaloes heaped up to be made into fuel cakes, and the biting, choking, pungent fumes that oozed from its side. The absence of a drainage system had, through the ruins of various seasons, made of the quarter a marsh which gave out the most offensive stink. And altogether the ramparts of human and animal refuse that lay on the outskirts of this little colony, and the ugliness, squalor and the misery which lay within it made it an 'uncongenial' place to live in. (*Untouchable* 1)

The conditions are abominable, the squalor and the congestion making it a health hazard. They also point to the poverty of these people. Here caste and class appear to go hand in hand.

In the morning of the day described in the novel, Bakha is awakened by an abusive shout, "Oh, Bakhya! Oh, Bakhya! Oh, you scoundrel of a sweeper's son! Come and clear a latrine for me! Why are not the latrines clean, you rouge of a Bakhe! There is not one fit to go near! I have walked all round! Do you know you are responsible for my piles? I caught the contagion sitting on one of those unclean latrines!" (17) It is the high caste Habilder Charat Singh, the famous hockey player of the 38th Dogras Regiment, who is not bothered to throw such abuse to awaken a person in the morning. At the same

time, none other than an untouchable tolerates and digests such abuse while still in bed in the morning, and go out for the day's work, to work in the barracks to clear latrines for Habilder Charat Singh and others. This is the beginning of a day in the life of untouchable Bakha; but the end of the day shows a ray of hope to Bakha of beginning the day in a better way, not as a sweeper, but as someone else. This is the place Bakha has to return to, every day after work, a world separated from that of the caste Hindus.

From his childhood Bakha admires the *sahibs* of the army barracks; he likes to imitate them in manners and dress, and he aspires to change his profession and become a *sahib* or a *babu.* When one day he expresses his desire of becoming a sahib or a babu to his uncle at the British barracks, he is told that he must first acquire education to fulfil his desire. Bakha reports his uncle's advice to his father; but his father's reply stuns and frustrates him and makes him more conscious of his caste: "Schools were meant for the babus, not for the lowly sweepers" (30). Much later, when he works in the barracks as a sweeper, he realises the true meaning of his father's reply: "There was no school which would admit him because the parents of the other children would not allow their sons to be contaminated by the touch of the low-caste man's sons" (30-31). Bakha fails to understand the logic behind the refusal to admit in schools; it seems to him irrational and absurd, because most of the caste Hindu boys touch him willingly when they play hockey. His heart is filled with hatred for the older generation Hindus who seem so cruel to him compared to the new generation. This hatred of Bakha for the older generation suggests a change, however mild and ineffective, in the society he lives in.

Anand draws a picture of seclusion of the untouchables by the upper caste people in the society. But the miseries of the untouchables do not end in such seclusion only. For fear of defilement, the upper caste Hindus do not allow the outcastes to draw water from the *caste well,* meant for the caste Hindus, nor do they allow them access to the nearby brook. "So the outcastes had to wait for chance to bring some caste Hindu to the well, for luck to decide that he was kind, for Fate to ordain that he had time – to get their pitchers filled with water"(15). But, in the filthy surrounding in which they are forced to live, they need more than a pitcher full of water. Since there is always scarcity of water, they learn to manage without it, "till sanitation, cleanliness and hygiene had lost its meanings for them" (67).Thus filthiness is not their caste trait but a direct outcome of

the deprivation of their basic needs. Anand describes, in this way, the rueful plight of the untouchables during the last phase of the British rule in India, and tries to arouse sympathy and compassion for them which, he thinks, might help bringing social change.

Bakha's tragedy is that the prevailing caste ideology does not even allow him to change his hereditary profession, to dream of becoming someone else, like a washerman, not to think of a sahib or a babu, and thus to climb one step higher in the caste ladder. Anand narrates how Ram Charan, the washerman's son, who lives in the colony and himself an outcaste, boasts by telling Bakha that though he plays with him and touches him, he is a Hindu, while Bakha is a mere sweeper. By this Anand wants to suggest that, "there were degrees of castes among the low castes, and that he was of the lowest" (80). This gradation among the low castes stands in the way of developing a common caste identity, and in forming a class consciousness among them which is essential for any kind of fruitful resistance. Though they all live in the same outcaste colony, there are hazy barriers amongst them that prevent the untouchables to form an ideology, an ideology of resistance that can challenge upper caste hegemony. The upper castes seize that opportunity and continue to establish their hegemony more strongly. In order to make the outcastes powerless, they even deprive them of their right to education.

After his work in the barracks, Bakha goes to the town, and then to the temple to sweep and clean the courtyard on his father's direction. In the town, when Bakha buys some *jalebis* at the Bengali sweetmeat seller's shop, he is asked to place "four nickel coins on the shoe-board for the confectioner's assistant who stood by to splash some water on them"(37) for purifying the coins. Bakha feels humiliated as well as angry. Again, on the street when Bakha accidentally brushes against a high caste man, the man yells and swears at him in the foulest manner for touching him, and thereby polluting him and his fresh clothes. Anand describes Bakha's reaction in this way:

> Bakha stood amazed, embarrassed. He was deaf and dumb. His senses were paralysed....The fellow's eyes were flaming and red-hot. (38)

As the touched man abuses Bakha, the crowd stands around him unmoved, taking a sort of sadistic delight in watching him. To Bakha it is one endless experience

> of humiliation. He asks the vital question: “Why are we always abused?...Because we are sweepers” (43).

As Bakha reflects on his and his community’s predicament, he realizes how people enjoyed being abusive for little or no reason.

After the humiliation in the town, Bakha proceeds to the temple to sweep its courtyard. On arrival, he wants have a glimpse of the inside of the temple. As he climbs five steps out of the fifteen, the Brahmin priest shouts at the top of his voice, charging him with polluting the entire temple. Then comes a warning from one of the crowd :

> Get off the steps, you scavenger! Off with you! You have defiled our whole service. You have defiled our temple! Now we will have to pay for the purifactory ceremony. Get down, get away, you dog! (53)

The crowd is concerned, ironically, about *defilement from a distance*, caused by the appearance of an untouchable on the steps of the temple. A priest joins the crowd and shrieks: “I have been defiled by contact” (53). Bakha, however, comes to know the real story from his sister Sohini who is there to tell the truth.

> ...that man made suggestions to me, when I was cleaning the lavatory of his house there. And when I screamed, he came out shouting that he had been defiled. (54)

This little incident exposes the corruption not just surrounding priests and priesthood but the entire caste hierarchy. Untouchables, particularly women, not deemed fit for anything worthwhile—and considered objects of defilement even from a distance—are still good enough for the sexual gratification of priests and high-caste men. Anand’s awareness of the evil power of caste and the rampant abuse of the lower castes by society elders, caste superiors and men of power lends a sense of urgency to the narrative.

Bakha’s experiences—in the sweet shop, with the ‘touched’ man in the town, and then in the temple—make his mind and body smoulder with a desire for revenge. However, the stigma of untouchability imposed on him by history and tradition has already emasculated him. When he is abused by the upper castes, his instinctive response is to ask for forgiveness. But, repeated humiliation stirs up a deep anger within him. He knows that he is physically stronger than his tormentors, but he cannot fight against the

setup. He comes to terms with his emotions as he “lapsed back, wild with torture, biting his lips, ruminating his grievances” (56). The ideology of social discrimination that has existed for generations makes the Bakhas of the society mentally crippled, generation after generation, and robs them of their courage to protest against the irrational.

Caste hierarchies are so dominant at that time that majority of the untouchables are forced to accept their position at the bottom with caste Hindus as their “masters.” Even Bakha’s father Lakha advises him to respect the caste Hindus and obey them: “They are our masters. We must respect them and do as they tell us” (71). This advice of Lakha to his son reflects the feeling of defeat of the older generation regarding casteism.

The notion of purity and pollution not only provides the upper castes the power to oppress but also to extract “surplus value” (Day 13), from them. Marx’s theory of surplus value states that the upper class exploits the lower class by paying them less for their labour than they actually deserve. In India caste and class boundaries often overlap, allowing the upper castes to abuse those supposedly inferior to them. They pay very little or nothing as remuneration to the untouchables for their service.

Though Bakha works in the army cantonment as a sweeper and receives a regular salary—and sometimes “bakshis” as well—he is hardly given any money by the caste Hindus for his work. All that he receives as a reward from them is leftover food, used clothes and other used items. Since they are often short of money, Bakha and his siblings regularly go out begging. This is an extreme form of economic exploitation. The untouchables have to compromise with this situation because they face severe problems even in using whatever little money they have. Most of the shopkeepers are unwilling to sell things to an untouchable and those few, who do, never accept the money without “purification”, as it happens in the Bengali sweetmeat shop. In this way, the untouchables are deprived of their share in the “exchange relation” (Day 12), and hence pushed to the periphery of the economic sphere.

Economic exploitation combines with physical and social oppression. The untouchables are so oppressed and demoralized by the caste system that they cannot see any way to escape from it, not even through conversion to other religions. When Colonel

Hutchinson tells Bakha about Christianity, he is very confused. The Colonel says that in comparison to other religions, Christianity respects the idea of a casteless society and promotes the value of equality and brotherhood. Though Bakha admires the Colonel as well as the white soldiers at the barracks, he does not wish to be converted because Christianity is as alien to him as Hinduism.

Although Bakha belongs to the Hindu social system, he is never considered a proper Hindu. As an untouchable, he is never allowed entry into a temple, but religious thoughts never bother Bakha. Further, he is very much disillusioned with everything related to the white man and his religion when he recalls the contemptuous remark made by the Colonel's wife regarding his caste. "To Bakha... the few words which she had uttered carried a dread a hundred times more terrible than the fear inspired by the whole tirade of abuse by the touched man" (*Untouchable* 125). Bakha can see a common look of hatred in the round white face of the Colonel's wife and the sunken face of the touched man. Bakha's admiration for the whites ends once the white face gets associated with contempt for his caste.

When Bakha learns that Mahatma Gandhi is going to deliver a speech that day at Golbagh, he instinctively goes there as "the word 'Mahatma' was like a magical magnet to which he, like all the other people around him, rushed blindly" (126). Bakha attentively listens to every word of Gandhi and his speech appeals to him when Gandhi says that he would wish to be reborn as an untouchable so that he could share "their sorrows and sufferings and the affronts levelled at them" (138). He is overwhelmed by Mahatma Gandhi's emotional appeal to the caste Hindus: "All public wells, temples, roads, schools, sanatoriums, must be declared open to the Untouchables" (140). Throughout his speech, Gandhi speaks against the evils of untouchability and appeals to the caste Hindus to be sympathetic towards the untouchables. However, Gandhi's speech leaves Bakha in confusion, as he cannot find in the speech any practical solution to their problem. Although the untouchables are aware of Gandhi magic, they are sceptical about the practicability of his ideology. Perhaps a great social revolution could only offer significant contribution towards complete eradication of casteism.

Then there appears a young poet, Iqbal Nath speaking at the same venue. Bakha is more drawn to the speech of the radical young poet as he provides a solution to his problem. The poet, who is more inclined towards Ambedkarite ideology not only makes these people aware of the evils of the caste system and inequalities in the society but, also introduces them to the concept of using machine (like the flush system in toilets), one of the alternatives which can not only minimize the work of the manual scavengers but can also make them free from the stigma of untouchability. Bakha is very much impressed by the speech of the poet who speaks with much passion and enthusiasm:

> Well, we must destroy caste; we must destroy the inequalities of birth and unalterable vocations. We must recognize an equality of rights, privileges, and opportunities for everyone. The Mahatma didn't say so, but the legal and sociological basis of caste having been broken down by the British – Indian penal code, which recognizes the rights of every man before a court, caste is now mainly governed by profession. When the sweepers change their profession, they will no longer remain Untouchables. And they can do that soon, for the first thing we will do when we accept the machine, will be to introduce the machine which clears dung without anyone having to handle it- the flush system. Then the sweepers can be free from the stigma of untouchability and assume the dignity of status that is their right as useful members of a casteless and classless society. (146)

After listening to the Mahatma and the Poet, Bakha proceeds homewards, whispering to himself:

> I shall go and tell my father all that Gandhi said about us, and all that the poet said. Perhaps I can find the poet some day and ask him about his machine. (148)

The thought of the machine raises Bakha's hopes of beginning a *new* day, not as a sweeper, but as someone else.

Drawing Gandhi into the novel allows Anand to give a historical basis to the caste narrative. By inserting the radical poet into the scene, Anand critiques Gandhi's understanding of caste. Clearly, Gandhi's speech tries to arouse sympathy among the upper caste Hindus towards the untouchables. However, it does not provide any solution

to the problem of untouchability. Through the speech of the radical poet Iqbal Nath, Anand attempts to spread the message that social reformation must be combined with technology as a first step towards minimizing and eventually eradicating the daily contact of the so-called low-born with filth.

Viewed historically, the introduction of mechanized flushes had the potential to break the hegemonic and structural continuity of the pollution-purity divide. This divide fed on the caste hierarchy of the *varna* system that obligated a lower caste man or woman to clean the filth created by a higher caste man or woman. In the absence of tangible steps or devices to break the social barrier, Gandhi's rhetoric of empathy can be seen as well short of any practical utility. In fact, contemporary dalit critiques of Gandhian ideology point to a grievous lack of social utility in the latter's naming of the socially marginalized as harijans. Therefore, dalit criticism of Gandhi says that, while addressing the need to eradicate caste injustice, Gandhian ideology appealed only to the conscience of human beings without doing anything to destroy the very structural gridlock that created and sustained caste. While Anand does not explicitly work Ambedkar's ideology into the novel, he is aware of the rise of anti-Gandhian stirrings among the untouchables. Anand's ideology is one of resistance. He is against social discriminations like casteism. He registers his strong protest, through the words of Bakha, against Brahminical ideology that gives rise to casteism. He not only advocates a casteless society but also formulates a theory of universal modernity brought in by technology. The belief that the substitution of lowly and filthy menial jobs traditionally reserved for the lower castes by machine tools—mechanized cleaning of toilets instead of human handling of excreta—fired the imagination of writers and artists looking for alternatives to caste-based division of labour.

At the same time Anand depicts in his novel psychological dependence of the downtrodden. The undertone of the novel is that the untouchables are an integral part of the Hindu society; it is only an ideology that tries to separate them. On the other hand the novel hints at an inexplicable passiveness of the British rulers in taking any measures to eradicate evils like casteism from the society. The novel ends in an optimistic tone, in the form of Bakha's hope, of a casteless society in India.

A Fine Balance

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995) depicts the various forms of caste struggle and caste exploitation in pre-independence as well as post-independence India, illuminating the subtle changes that occur in the caste–class relationship in Indian society. *A Fine Balance* is set in an unnamed city by the sea (may be Bombay) initially in the mid-1970s, during the period of Emergency, and later in 1984 after the Prime Minister is assassinated, with flash back to pre-independence days. The story revolves around four main characters with varied backgrounds relating to caste, class and religion – Dina Dalal, Ishvar Darji, his nephew Omprakash Darji and a young student Manek Kohlah who come together and develop a special bond. The tailors Ishvar and Om are untouchable tanners or *chamars* who dare to challenge the dictates of caste oppression by choosing a profession other than the one ordained by their caste. Dina Dalal, a Parsi widow, once affluent, has a new tailoring business in her small rented apartment in which she lives alone. She also decides to take in paying guests and accommodates Maneck Kohlah, son of a moderately successful Parsi father with a small business. Though the city accommodates the untouchables alongside others, their life remains a challenge, a long struggle for survival, in independent India. But Mistry's suggestion that four people of different castes and classes can develop a *special bond*, although in a city, promises to look beyond the rigidities of the system in India.

A Fine Balance, set in independent India, presents two pictures – one of rural India and the other of urban India regarding the social problems faced by the untouchables. It is seen that caste prejudices continue in rural India even after independence but a significant change of attitude in the untouchables is noticed in this novel compared to *Untouchable.* They begin to hope that in independent India changing their hereditary profession and looking for a change in their class status may be a viable solution to their caste-related problems in urban India. They become more adventurous than their counterparts in *Untouchable* and move to the city for opportunities. It appears from the novel that cosmopolitanism, the ideology that all human beings belong to a community based on a shared morality, exists in the city—the relationship that binds together Ishvar and Om (the untouchables), Asharf (the Muslim), and Dina and Maneck (the Parsis) speaks of such cosmopolitanism.

But class distinctions and exploitations have been shown to pose a great problem in the city. Depiction of the lower class and often lower caste people living in the slums in horrific conditions reveals how the struggling downtrodden are always overlooked, neglected, rather oppressed and harassed by those who should have protected and taken care of them. Even the democratic government evicts them without compensation or rehabilitation and throws them into the street. Democracy does not help them unite and voice their rights and get their grievances redressed even after twenty five years of independence. On the other hand rural India is still being influenced by caste prejudices. When Isvar and Om come to the village after changing their profession from cobblers to tailors, and improving their economic status, the village high-castes do not accept them as their equals and deprive them of their right to vote in the elections. This shows that birth is a stronger parameter than wealth to determine social status in rural India even during the nineteen seventies.

Like *Untouchable* this novel also indicates no solution for the caste problem and ends on a pessimistic note. To make the reader comprehend the nature of the challenge faced by the new generation of the downtrodden, Mistry moves back into the past to the pre-independence days – to the days of Bakha and Munoo of *Untouchable* and *Coolie*, to look into the lives of Ishvar's parents Dukhi and Roopa:

> Besides tanning and leather working, Dukhi learnt what it was to be a Chamaar, an untouchable in village society... like the filth of dead animals which covered him and his father as they worked, the ethos of the caste system was smeared everywhere (*A Fine Balance* 96).

The life of the chamaar in a village is nothing but a traumatic existence. Chopping off fingers for an unjust accusation or losing a hand or a wrist for the same, being whipped for getting too close to the well; woman being shaved and walked naked through the square for refusing to go to the field with Zamindar's son (96) are usual day to day incidents. Like others, Dukhi Mochi also learns to live with "humiliation and forbearance as his constant companions" (97) which speaks of Dukhi's fatalism. The silent suffering of his wife Roopa, and the ruthless punishment meted out to his sons Ishvar and Narayan for transgressing the caste code by entering into the school premises makes Dukhi a much dejected man.

Sometimes Dukhi's fatalism transforms into protest – he wants to rebel against the system. However, he is aware of a somewhat liberal society in the town which embraces people of all castes and creeds; it is in the town that the leaders of the nationalist movement spread Gandhian ideology – Gandhi's strong protest against untouchability: "Remember what Ghandhi says, that untouchability poisons Hinduism as a drop of arsenic poisons milk," (107) says one of the leaders and the people take oath "to unite and fight this ungodly system of bigotry and evil" (108). In search of a solution he decides to go to his Muslim friend Ashraf:

> Ashraf was the Muslim tailor in town. He was Dukhi's age, and it was to him Dukhi used to go on the rare occasions when he could afford to get something for Roopa or the children–the Hindu tailor did not sew for untouchables. (106)

Dukhi goes to Ashraf this time for a different purpose: to request him to teach his sons tailoring, lift them from *mochis* to *darjis*, and help them get out of the clutches of casteism. Ashraf immediately complies with his request and refuses to accept any payment for taking on his sons as apprentices:

> 'They will be a help to me', he said. 'And how much food can two little boys eat? Whatever we cook, they will share with us. That's all right, nah? No restrictions?'
> 'No restrictions' said Dukhi.'(115)

There are no 'restrictions' whatsoever in the relationship between Dukhi, the mochi, and Ashraf, the muslim, because it is a relationship based on humanity, not on caste or class or religion. The town provides the children the necessary facilities to build and mould their dream. Under the fatherly guidance of Ashraf *chacha* they take lessons on tailoring during the day, and on alphabet and numbers after dinner at night.

By the time the mochi-turned-tailor brothers are about to complete their seven years of training with Ashraf Chacha in his Muzzafar Tailoring Company, they become eighteen and sixteen, and think of returning home. This is the time when independence of India knocks at the door, accompanied by the *Partition* which triggers ugly communal violence between the Hindus and the Muslims. Ashraf and his family are also threatened, and to save themselves from communal fanaticism, Ashraf changes overnight the name

of his shop to Krishna Tailors for a camouflage, and when he and his family are miraculously saved by the two brothers, Ashraf's wife Mumtaz falls on her knees before the two brothers, and expresses her gratitude weeping:

> Forever and ever, my life, my children, my husband's life, my home – everything, I owe to you. ... There is no repayment possible! ... From now on, this home is your home, as long as you will honour us with your presence! (130)

Human values overpower all ideologies, all artificial distinctions and barriers on the basis of caste, class and religion.

As the turmoil subsides, Ashraf restores the original name of his shop, and attends to his work of tailoring. Ashraf and his wife Mumtaz are satisfied at the two brothers' decision at the end of their apprentice: Ishvar chooses to stay with Ashraf as a paid assistant, and Narayan goes back to his parents in village to start tailoring as a profession on his own.

When Narayan returns to his native village, he notices the sharp difference between the two worlds. In the town, the hardware store owner, the coal merchant, the banya, the miller and the muslim tailor all live together in the same street (116) irrespective of caste and creed and religion whereas in the village there are still caste-based discrimination, oppression and exploitation. Though Narayan prospers in his tailoring business, he now has a family with his wife Radha, a son, Omprakash and two daughters, Leela and Rekha, and builds a 'pukka' house and pays to have a new well dug in the untouchable section of the village (136), still he is not satisfied and expresses his dissatisfaction to his father:

> More than twenty years have passed since independence. How much longer? I want to be able to drink from the village well, worship in the temple, walk where I like... 'Son, those are dangerous things to want. You changed from Chamaar to tailor. Be satisfied with that.' Narayan shook his head. 'That was your victory'. (142-143)

Although Dukhi's decision to send his sons to learn tailoring in town is very significant, he fails to summon courage to continue his protest against the social evil of casteism. It is his past experiences that prevent him from doing so. This signifies the difference or

conflict in the attitudes of two generations – the generation of the father and that of the son. One can interpret this conflict in attitude as a step forward towards eliminating this social evil.

Around election time for the Parliament political leaders of different parties rush to the village to woo the voters with their speeches explaining their ideologies, plans and programmes for the uplift of the village people:

> The speeches were crammed with promises of every shape and size: promises of new schools, clean water, and health care; promises of land for landless peasants, through redistribution and stricter enforcement of the Land Ceiling Act; promises of powerful laws to punish any discrimination against, and harassment of, backward castes by upper castes; promises to abolish bonded labour, child labour, sati, dowry system, child marriage. (143)

But the village people, though they are of low castes and most of them illiterate, know the hollowness of such speeches:

> 'There must be a lot of duplication in our country's laws', said Dukhi. 'Every time there are elections, they talk of passing the same ones passed twenty years ago. Someone should remind them they need to apply the laws.'
> 'For politicians, passing laws is like passing water,' said Narayan. 'It all ends down the drain. (143)

With such false promises they capture power, mould their own fate, but the fate of the downtrodden changes little. This is a kind of exploitation – befooling the common man by the upper class politicians for their own interests, and applying all sorts of corrupt practices to win the elections.

This time, the elections bring unexpected and unbelievable doom to the Dukhi family. Narayan takes it as a challenge, attempts to cast his vote in the election defying the resistance of the upper caste thakur, but he pays the heaviest price – all his efforts to get out of the dirty clutches of casteism go in vain. Narayan and his entire family are burnt alive by the henchmen of the Thakur. This is an act of revenge on Narayan by the upper caste Thakur, not only for asserting his right, being an untouchable, to vote but also for

becoming wealthy by changing his hereditary occupation. This is a binary effect of the prevailing caste ideology as well as class ideology. Such an incident happens in rural India after more than twenty years of independence.

While Narayan and his family perish in the village, his son Om and his brother Ishvar survive, being in town with Ashraf's family. Om was sent by his father to his uncle Ishvar, when he was only eight years old, to learn tailoring and to attend town schools which were almost free from restrictions to admit low caste students compared to the village schools.

Changing time, combined with mechanization, puts Ashraf in trouble – his tailoring business, with the arrival of readymade garments in the market, begins to decline. So, it is time for the uncle and the nephew to step out of the Ashraf family and leave for the city by the sea with new hopes, new dreams as well as new anxieties and uncertainties. They carry with them the memories of the village and the town.

After managing the initial difficulties, hardship, anxieties and problems in the unfamiliar big city, they get settled; they get work to stitch clothes for Dina Dalal who supplies these clothes to Au Revoir Exports, an exporting firm, and they arrange accommodation, a roof, in a congested slum area. Some pleasant experiences get associated with their slum life – the woman in the other shack offering Om in the morning two glassfuls of water from her earthen pitcher when the common water tap is still dry, Rajaram lending them a stove to cook food till they procure one, and sometimes even cooking food for them. Such experiences make them forget their caste identity, and make them feel as if they are living in a casteless society.

They meet Maneck in Dina Dalal's apartment, and their journey begins smoothly with promise of a hassle-free life; but they fail to foresee the impending calamity waiting for them. It is Emergency time – new government rules and laws and restrictions are coming into force. They already have experience of being forcefully picked up from their shacks in the slums, dumped in double-decker buses and taken to make the Prime Minister's rally swell and look impressive. But this time the problem is different and more serious; in the name of the Slum Prevention and City Beautification, their slum dwellings have

been flattened one evening by bulldozers, and they are rendered roofless and thrown into the street. The hutment dwellers vent their anguish in helpless outrage:

> Heartless animals! For the poor, there is no justice, ever! We had next to nothing, now it's less than nothing! What is our crime, where are we to go? (295)

One of them describes what happens:

> The men, the ones who said they were safety inspectors. They tricked us. Sent by the government, they said, to check the colony. At first, the people were pleased; the authorities were taking some interest. Maybe improvements were coming – water, latrines, lights, like they kept promising at voting time. So we did as they told us, came out of the shacks. But once the colony was empty, the big machines went in. (295)

It is inhuman brutality, equatable to caste atrocity, and it goes against the policy of caring the poor and the downtrodden, which is surely inscribed in the state ideology. However, the *ideological state apparatuses* brainwash some people to support the Emergency, praise government actions like clearing the slums without compensation to beautify the city, and justify strict and ruthless enforcement of the Emergency laws for maintenance of discipline in the administrative system.

Thrown into the street, Ishvar and Om, along with many others, spend a sleepless night, and then they come to Dinabai with their belongings to request her to give them shelter for a few days. But, Dina declines the request for fear of the police and the rent-collector questioning her, and taking action, for keeping too many guests in the small apartment. However, Maneck shows his sympathy for them, and he pleads with Dina Aunty: "You could have let them stay at least tonight. They could have slept in my room" (304). Maneck's appeal reflects pure innocence and humane feeling.

Ishwar and Om have no other choice but to use odd places for shelter at night, when another misfortune befalls them. One night, they are rounded up by the police on the plea of a 'beggar raid', an Emergency action, and are sold to a 'labour camp'. After two months of harrowing and agonising experiences in the camp, they somehow succeed, with the help of a 'Beggarmaster', to bribe their way out. The Beggarmaster takes them

to Dinabai who is their only hope. Dinabai's heart softens, she is overwhelmed by the story of their misfortune, and welcomes them to her flat, and makes her flat a home – a home for the four of them.

When Ishvar and Om first came to Dina and started working, she used to keep distance from them, and also did not like Maneck socializing with them, not because they were chammars, untouchables, but because they looked shabby and dirty, and she was very much allergic to their living in a slum area, and very often, she advised them on hygiene and cleanliness. But now her attitude changes and they begin to live together as a family forgetting all the differences that exist between them regarding their caste, class and social backgrounds. Mistry deftly portrays the relationship, the bond of intimacy that grows out of mutual understanding, sympathy and compassion between the four of them, and indicates the existence of a society in the city, which tends to be caste free.

Now, the only thought that haunts Ishvar's mind is to find a bride for his nephew Om. He decides to take Om to the village in search of a bride for him. But his decision brings the final spate of sorrows and miseries to their lives. They find to their surprise that the caste-dominated society in their village has not changed during these years. Rather, the Emergency opens before the upper castes new ways to oppress, squeeze and torture the untouchables. The Thakur takes advantage of the Government sponsored sterilization programme during the period of Emergency to take revenge upon Om who had earlier dared to challenge his supremacy. Om is castrated in one of the "dozen tents that had been pitched in a field on the outskirts (of the town), where the stubble of the recent harvest still lingered" (531). Ishvar also becomes a victim of the sterilization programme, and eventually becomes almost invalid with gangrene in his legs.

Heart-broken and dejected, the uncle and the nephew decide to return to the city which, they hope, will be more accommodating and sympathetic.

Meanwhile changes come to the lives of Dina Dalal and Maneck. With his father's business failing, Maneck leaves for Dubai in the Middle East to work there after getting a certificate on refrigeration and air-conditioning from his college. Dina is evicted from her flat by the land lord, and she is forced to go back to her brother Nusswan whom she

did not like, and therefore, chose to live alone in the flat. When Maneck returns home for the second time in eight years for his father's funeral, he finds the place gripped by bloody violence that follows the Prime Minister's assassination, and when he comes to Dina Aunty he learns about the horrific lives Ishvar and Om are leading as beggars after their return from the village. He is very much disturbed mentally when he reads in a news paper that the three sisters of Avinash, his onetime hostel mate during his college days, hang themselves being unable to bear their parents' humiliation at not being able to provide dowries for their marriages. While proceeding to the railway station after his visit to Dina Aunty, he is deeply shocked to see Ishvar and Om on the street as beggars in filthy clothes. The mental burden becomes too heavy for Maneck, and he ends his life by throwing himself before a running train.

However, the bond of a broken home still continues when Ishvar and Om come regularly to visit Dinabai, talk emotionally about Maneck and their past lives. Dina gives them money whenever they come, and feeds them, "filled water glasses for them and, while they drank, dished out masoor in plates" (613); she sees them as human beings, not as outcastes. They are all victims of exploitation and oppression in the prevailing social set-up.

The novel shows that things do not change in rural India as caste prejudices continue even after twenty five years of independence. This is obvious from the torture meted out to the untouchables Ishvar and Om by the upper caste Thakur, even though they have changed their profession from mochis to tailors. They are punished for striving to change their lot. Om's father Narayan is burnt to death for daring to cast his vote in the elections. These incidents show that atrocities continue in the rural parts of the country in the name of caste prejudice. There is no legal action on the persons indulging in such mindless violence.

However, the town and the city present a somewhat different and encouraging picture. That the Muslim tailor Ashraf in the town keeps the untouchables Ishvar and Om in his home, feeds them, teaches them tailoring without any remuneration, and elevate them from mochis to tailors is a fine example of human relationship untouched by caste, class and religion which are sources of trouble to destabilise the harmony in the society.

Similarly the association of Dina, Ishvar, Om and Maneck speaks of a society based on humanity, not on caste, class and religion. Depiction of the people living in the slums in horrific conditions reveals how the struggling downtrodden are always overlooked, neglected, rather oppressed and harassed by those who should have protected and taken care of, them. This is a glaring example of exploitation. Finally the occasional riots that break out between different communities, guided by different ideologies, do not speak well of a democratic, socialistic, secular country. All throughout the novel, the author's deep concern for all these social problems is evident.

The God of Small Things

Arundhati Roy in her novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997) focuses on the patriarchal power structures and caste and class based oppression of women and low class/caste men. Although the extended family at the heart of the novel is Christian, its members are not free of some of the oppressive social structures upheld by Hinduism. The women are often at the mercy of the men and have little support from other women to put up any counter of protest. Roy shows how differences of caste, class, gender and religion influence social as well as personal relationships.

Two small children are used in the narrative to give their reaction to the complications of the adult world of restrictions and violence. They are threatened and coerced into giving false evidence against the low class man Velutha who had befriended them. Velutha dies as a result of the violence perpetrated on him by society and the police, and the two children are left to live with a combination of grief and guilt.

The novel presents a rigid caste structure where not only the members of the low caste but also those rebellious individuals who try to break free of the patriarchal structures are branded as untouchable. While Velutha is an untouchable because of his caste and birth, Ammu becomes untouchable when she returns home as a divorced woman with twin children. That she had to escape from her violent husband to save herself, her chastity and sanity, apart from her infants, fails to interest her parents and more so, her aunt Baby Kochamma, who turns her personal bitterness on Ammu, her niece.

There are three generations of men and women in the novel. The older generation is represented by Mammachi and Pappachi, the parents of Ammu and her aunt Baby Kochamma. Ammu marries a man called Baba during a visit to an aunt in Calcutta (Kolkata) to escape the domination of her parents. Her husband turns out to be an alcoholic and violent. Ammu gives birth to twins, Rahel and Estha, and runs away with her children when she learns that her husband was about to send her to bestow sexual favours on his boss. When she returns home to Kerala, after her divorce, she finds that there is no place for her there. She is an outcast, first for marrying outside her community and second, for being a divorcee.In this case caste prescriptions are clearly seen to be gendered.

In *The God of Small Things*, caste discrimination is practised by the Christians as well as the Hindus. This is seen in the attitude of the Ipes towards the lower castes:

> As a young boy, Velutha would come with Vellya Paapen to the back entrance of the Ayemenem House to deliver the coconuts they had plucked from the trees in the compound. Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched. (73)

It may be noted that both groups happen to be Christians; yet issues of untouchability and outcasts continue in that part of Kerala:

> When the British came to Malabar, a number of Paravans, Pelayas and Pulayas (among them Velutha's grandfather, Kelan) converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican Church to escape the scourge of Untouchability. As added incentive they were given a little food and money. They were known as the Rice-Christians. It didn't take them long to realize that they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire. They were made to have separate churches, with separate services, and separate priests. As a special favour they were even given their own separate Pariah Bishop. After Independence they found they were not entitled to any government benefits like job reservations or bank loans at low interest rates, because officially, on paper, they were Christians, and therefore casteless. (74)

The intervention of Christianity does little to ameliorate their suffering as the discrimination and the social ostracization continues. Instead of relief from the stigma of untouchability, conversion to Christianity only serves to rob them of their Constitutional benefits and protection.

When Ammu has an affair with the low caste Velutha and is discovered by the family, their anger knows no limits. Ammu is locked in her room and Velutha is wrongly framed in a criminal case resulting in his arrest, severe beating by the police and consequent death. Mammachi who is regularly abused by her husband is totally intolerant of the affair between Ammu and Velutha. Kochamma who wrongly bears Velutha a grudge, frames him and terrorizes the children into lying against him to the police. Velutha offers affection and companionship to the children and their mother. He meets Ammu at night by river and their union is doomed from the start. Ammu goes to the police station to try and save Velutha but is insulted by the police. Velutha dies and Ammu is banished from Ayemenem. She dies at the age of thirty one.

Interestingly, it is Velutha's father who reports his son's transgression to Mammachi when he discovers the latter's affair with Ammu: "Vellya Paapen told Mammachi what he had seen. He asked God's forgiveness for having spawned a monster. He offered to kill his son with his own bare hands. To destroy what he had created" (255). As if that was not enough, he also offered to return his 'fixed eye':

> When Mammachi arrived in the kitchen...Vellya Paapen climbed up the kitchen steps and offered her his mortgaged eye...She recoiled from its slippery hardness. Its slimy marbleness...She groped her way to the sink, and soaped away the sodden Paraven's eye-juices. She smelled her hands when she'd finished.... Vellya Paapen had come to tell Mammachi himself. As a Paraven and a man with mortgaged body parts , he considered it his duty. The lovers. Sprung from his loins and hers. His son and her daughter. They had made the unthinkable thinkable and the impossible really happen. (256)

As far as the older generation is concerned, they can look at the natural love affair, however illicit, of two unhappy people, only in terms of gross social transgression. For the upper caste woman it is an insult whereas for the hapless untouchable father, it is an

injury inflicted by his errant son. Here both parents tend to look at the ‘transgression’ of their adult offsprings in terms of violation of caste regulations without admitting to gender oppression on their part.

Ammu and Velutha are not allowed to survive because they offer a challenge to the narrow structures of society. Secretly, Velutha had looked for relief from Communism and through his art. While his art makes him big, the Marxist leadership refuses to support him when he finds himself in trouble. He was the god of little things but the rigid and oppressive society can only look at him as a paravan, an untouchable. This seen in the treatment meted out to him on a daily basis when his skills as a carpenter are used by Mammachi:

> Mammachi rehired Velutha as the factory carpenter and put him in charge of general maintenance. It caused a great deal of resentment among the other Touchable factory workers because, according to them, Paravans were not meant to be carpenters. And certainly, prodigal Paravans were not meant to be rehired. To keep the others happy, and since she knew that nobody else would hire him as a carpenter, Mammachi paid Velutha less than she would a Touchable carpenter but more than she would a Paravan. Mammachi didn’t encourage him to enter the house (except when she needed something mended or installed). She thought that he ought to be grateful that he was allowed on the factory premises at all, and allowed to touch things that Touchables touched. She said that it was a big step for a Paravan. (37)

Velutha had stayed away from home for four years because of his tensional relationship with his father. When he returns, his skills ensure that he is re-employed at the pickle factory but it is not forgotten that he is an untouchable and so not worthy of any consideration.

However, Velutha’s contribution at the factory is significant:

> Apart from his carpentry skills, Velutha had a way with machines. Mammachi (with impenetrable Touchable logic) often said that if only he hadn’t been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer. He mended radios, clocks, water pumps. He looked after the plumbing and all the electrical gadgets in the house.

> When Mammachi decided to enclose the back verandah, it was Velutha who designed and built the sliding-folding door that later became all the rage in Ayemenem. Velutha knew more about the machines in the factory than anyone else. When Chacko resigned his job in Madras and returned to Ayemenem with a Bharat bottle-sealing machine, it was Velutha who re-assembled it and set it up. It was Velutha who maintained the new canning machine and the automatic pineapple slicer. Velutha who oiled the water pump and the small diesel generator. Velutha who built the aluminum sheet-lined, easy-to-clean cutting surfaces, and the ground-level furnaces for boiling fruit. (36)

It was only his caste which prevented Velutha from rising in society. His innumerable skills instilled in him a sense of confidence and pride which his father felt, were unbecoming in a paravan. The novel informs:

> Velutha's father, Vellya Paapen, however, was an Old-World Paravan....When he had his accident with the stone chip, Mammachi organized and paid for his glass eye. He hadn't worked off his debt yet, and though he knew he wasn't expected to, that he wouldn't ever be able to, he felt that his eye was not his own. His gratitude widened his smile and bent his back. (36)

The tragic irony lies in the fact that it is the people for whom he worked who should have felt beholden, instead of him thinking he owed them. Vellya Paapen's obsequious gratitude is typical of his caste and station and he cannot reconcile himself with his son's quiet self-contained demeanour. This is one of the reasons for the father-son conflict.

> Vellya Paapen feared for his younger son. He couldn't say what it was that frightened him. It was nothing that he had said. Or done. It was not what he said, but the way he said it. Not what he did, but the way he did it. Perhaps it was just a lack of hesitation.An unwarranted assurance. In the way he walked. The way he held his head . The quiet way he offered suggestions without being asked. Or the quiet way in which he disregarded suggestions without appearing to rebel. While these were qualities that were perfectly acceptable, perhaps even desirable, in Touchables, Vellya Paapen thought that in a Paravan they could (and would, and indeed, should) be construed as insolence.(76)

Velutha's failure to understand his father's unease over the manner in which he conducted himself in public, leads to his leaving home for four years. When he returns, his mother is dead and his brother paralysed after falling from a tree. Velutha's predicament is not understood by his father; nor does Velutha understand him. What the novel shows is not the conflict between father and son but between different generations with conflicting mindsets. While Vellya Paapen is schooled to accepting the narrow caste norms without even thinking about them, Velutha's self-assured conduct reflects the pride of the skilled worker who contributes to society and who does not have to rely on people's patronage or condescension for his living. Consciously or unconsciously, Velutha challenges the narrowness of caste restrictions and even interrogates them by his actions without actually articulating them.

Sea of Poppies

Amitav Ghosh presents the trauma and oppression of the lower caste people and the inter-caste conflict in his *Sea of Poppies* (2008). The oppression is so acute that Kalua the low caste man who marries Deeti the upper-caste widow to save her from being burnt at her late husband's funeral pyre have to flee on a ship to Mauritius. The migration aspect of the novel is addressed in the second chapter. In this chapter only the caste conflict and oppression of low caste people will be examined.The attitude of the upper caste villagers reflects their gendered consciousness as they decide what is necessary for the women in the house and in the fields.Women are not only under strict patriarchal control, they are also expected to fall in with plans laid for them by the men and the seniors in the family. So much so that Deeti's mother-in-law decides to send her brother-in-law to her marriage bed to cover up for her impotent husband.Deeti is drugged by her mother-in-law and only learns the truth when her brother-in-law discloses that sordid truth as her husband lay dying.One can recall here Velaskar's comments on the control over women's reproduction and production abilities within caste parameters("Caste and Gender" 402).

Being an untouchable, Kalua lives in the "Chamar-basti, a cluster of huts inhabited only by the people of his caste" (*Sea of Poppies* 53), outside the village, away from the settlements of the upper caste Hindus. This is the social condition of the untouchables

about one hundred years before Bakha and Dukhi's time. Although a man of enormous build and colossal strength, he is simple and slow. So he is easily duped by everyone—his relatives as well as the upper caste Thakurs of Ghazipur. The upper caste and upper class Thakurs exploit his great physical strength for their own profit. They compel him to fight wrestling matches just for their enjoyment and later when he starts to win matches, he is used as a source of income. In return, Kalua is gifted with an ox-cart to earn his living.

As their greed increases, they make Kalua agree to have matches at Benaras, and threaten him to confiscate his ox-cart, his only source of income, if he refuses to oblige them. But he fails to succeed there, as he is not aware of the tricks of the Benares wrestlers. For in Benares, "wrestling was a trial not just of strength, but also of intelligence" (55).

His defeat at Benares brings to him more trouble and torture from the Thakurs of Ghazipur. One particular night, under the cover of darkness, they carry Kalua with a halter around his neck like a horse to the poppy field with the intention of mating him with a black mare as a punishment on him for losing the match at Benares. When Kalua persistently asks forgiveness for no fault of his own, in a sobbing and whimpering voice, he receives in return "volleys of kicks and curses" (56).They whip him on his naked back and compels him to mate with the animal from the rear. This ghastly vulgar incident is an expression of an extreme form of hatred caused by caste and class discrimination. The Thakurs, perhaps, get a sadistic pleasure, and a feeling of pride for their power and position, in torturing poor and helpless Kalua.

> By chance, Deeti, happens to pass by the poppy field and observe this heinous incident while coming to fetch water from the river Ganga. She is dazed with shock and horror. She keeps herself hidden in the poppy field and in a state of utter surprise she thinks: "So it could happen to a man too? Even a powerful giant of a man could be humiliated and destroyed in a way that far exceeded his body's capacity for pain?"(57). Kalua is physically stronger than his tormentors, but he cannot fight back because of the strictures stipulated in the caste system. Centuries of suppression has robbed him and members of his caste of the necessary mental strength and courage to retaliate against the upper caste

> oppressors. As a woman, Deeti too belongs to the weaker section and she knows very well how hegemonic powers subdue the fate of those who are powerless. Naturally, sympathy arises in Deeti's heart for Kalua who is lying unconscious in the sand. His face is familiar to her as he takes her rcippled, opium-addicted husband in his ox-cart daily to the Ghazipur opium factory, although she then consciously avoids his shadow as he is an untouchable.

Once the thakurs leave the place Deeti creeps out of hiding to see if Kalua is alive:

> She crept out of her hiding-place and lowered herself to a squatting position beside Kalua's unconscious body. He was lying in shadow so she couldn't tell whether he was breathing or not. She put out a hand to touch his chest, but only to snatch it back: to think of touching a naked man was bad enough – and when that man was of Kalua's station, wasn't it almost a plea for retribution? She cast a furtive glance around her, and then, in defiance of the world's unseen presence, she put out a finger and allowed it to fall on Kalua's chest. The drumbeat of his heart reassured her and she quickly withdrew her hand, preparing to dart back into the poppies if his eyes showed any sign of coming open. But they remained shut and his body lay so peacefully inert that she felt no fear in examining him more closely. She saw now that his size was deceptive, that he was quite young.... His langot was lying nearby, glowing white in the moonlight, and this too she fetched and fastidiously opened out. (58)

This is how Deeti helps Kalua as he lay unconscious, with guilt and trepidation because she was touching a strange man and that too of a lower caste. She watches from the poppy field till Kalua gains consciousness and rising to his feet, slowly ambles away. It is two years after this incident that she seeks out Kalua to fetch her sick husband home from the factory.

Deeti goes with her daughter on Kalua's cart to bring her sick husband home. Although she looks after her husband he dies after a few days because of his opium addiction. It is then that she realizes that her in-laws want her to sacrifice herself by committing 'sati,' that is jumping into her dead husband's funeral pyre. This is motivated by their desire to grab what little land her husband had owned, and for family vanity. This plan to push her

to her death on one hand points to oppression of women within the family and caste, and on the other it reflects narrow and obsolete caste practices which are revived once in a while for mainly economic reasons.

Prior to that as her husband lay on his sick bed, Deeti has to put up with regular sexual assaults from her brother-in-law as on the pretext of visiting his brother, he came to their home regularly. The assaults and insinuations had reached such a pitch that Deeti had to arm herself with a knife to fight him in the eventuality of an attack on her person:

> Sitting on his brother's bed, he would look at her and fondle himself through the folds of his dhoti; when Deeti knelt to feed Hukam Singh, he would lean so close as to brush her breasts with his knees and elbows. His advances became so aggressive that Deeti took to hiding a small knife in the folds of her sari, fearing that he might attack her, right on her husband's bed. (157)

Finally he corners her but "The assault, when it came, was not physical, but rather an admission and an argument. He cornered her inside the very room where her husband was lying supine on his bed. Listen to me, Kabutri-ki-ma, he said. You know very well how your daughter was conceived – why pretend? You know that you would be childless today if not for me" (157).

Deeti's worst fears are confirmed as she learns from her brother-in-law what she had only guessed from her mother-in-law, that it was not her impotent husband but his brother who had had sex with her after she had been drugged by her mother-in-law. Such practices are not uncommon among certain communities to ensure family succession, where women are used for reproduction on purely cynical grounds.

Kalua, in the meantime hears of Hukam Singh's death only by accident as he picks up two weary men on their way to his house:

> The oddly surreptitious behaviour of the two men set Kalua to wondering whether something untoward was under way. He ... asked himself why these men, who didn't know Hukam Singh well enough to be aware of the location of his dwelling, would come such a great distance to be present at his cremation.

> And why was the cremation to be near the dead man's home rather than in the cremation ghat? No: there was something in this that was out of the ordinary. Kalua became more and more convinced of this as they approached their destination – for he saw now that there were a great many others heading towards the same place, more than seemed likely to attend the funeral of a man like Hukam Singh.... When they reached the dwelling, his suspicions deepened, for he saw that the pyre was a great mound of wood, on the banks of the Ganga. Not only was it far larger than was necessary for the cremation of a single man, it was surrounded by a profusion of offerings and objects, as if it were being readied for some larger purpose. (175-76)

Once he learns what is afoot, Kalua tries to think of a way to avert the planned 'sati.' He waits till the pyre is lit and people are watching the flames, then launches his attack:

> Now, still keeping to the shadows, he crept down to the edge of the crowd and rose to his feet. Unloosing a roar, he began to whirl the bamboo platform above his head, holding it by the end of its rope. The heavy, sharp-edged object became a blur, cracking heads and breaking bones, clearing a path through the crowd – people fled from the hurtling projectile, like cattle scattering before some whirling demon. Racing to the mound, Kalua placed the platform against the fire, scrambled to the top, and snatched Deeti from the flames. With her inert body slung over his shoulder, he jumped back to the ground and ran towards the river, dragging the now-smouldering bamboo rectangle behind him, on its rope. On reaching the water, he thrust the platform into the river and placed Deeti upon it. Then, pushing free of the shore, he threw himself flat on the improvised raft and began to kick his heels in the water, steering out towards midstream. All of this was the work of a minute or two and by the time Chandan Singh and his cohorts gave chase, the river had carried Kalua and Deeti away from the flaming pyre, into the dark of the night. (177)

When the untouchable Kalua saves Deeti from becoming a 'sati' after her husband's death, she knows that she is going to spend the rest of her life with this man. This was the very same man she kept away from, when her husband was alive. Her gratitude for him knows no bounds for saving her life. Now she also has a strange sensation. She feels as if she has left her old self behind: "...she did not feel herself to be living in the same

sense as before: a curious feeling, of joy mixed with resignation, crept into her heart, for it was as if she really had died and been delivered betimes in rebirth, to her next life: she had shed the body of the old Deeti" (178). When the thoughts of their escape sink in, Kalua wonders:

> But where will we go now? he said. What will we do? They'll hunt for us everywhere, in the cities and the villages.
>
> Although she had no more of a plan than he did, she said: We'll go away, far away, we'll find a place where no one will know anything about us except that we are married.
> Married? he said.
>
> Yes. (180)

For Deeti it is the end of her old life and a new beginning which makes her feel liberated and hopeful. They exchange flower garlands to symbolise their union. They continue with their journey on the water with their makeshift raft till they reach the town of Chhapra.

While struggling to survive there, they meet the duffadar who offers to take them on as girmitiyas bound for Mauritius. When, Kalua asked:

> And *ját* – what about caste?
>
> Caste doesn't matter, said the duffadar. All kinds of men are eager to sign up – Brahmins, Ahirs, Chamars, Telis. What matters is that they be young and able-bodied and willing to work. (205)

Although Deeti initially is not willing to embark on that voyage, circumstances force them to enlist as girmitiyas. Deeti recognizes a sardar from the opium factory and hears him telling others to hunt them, Kalua and her, down:

> Deeti hurried into the sandbanks, where Kalua was waiting. When they were a safe distance away, they found a place to sit and she told him what she had learnt – that her dead husband's family was determined to hunt them down, and had

> somehow come to know of their presence in Chhapra. It would not be safe to remain there one more day. (224)

At Kalua's suggestion they join the migrants' boat the next morning. The duffadar helps them to board it but another problem in the shape of Bhyro Singh who is a sardar on the ship awaits them. Byhro Singh, a relative of Deeti's former husband Hukum Singh, and the likes of him with their narrow caste discriminations were the people Deeti and Kalua were escaping from. Unfortunately, they find themselves in the confined space of the ship with Bhyro Singh asserting the Captain's delegated authority over the hapless people especially Kalua.

The colonial authorities are clever enough to anticipate that for establishing their dominance among Indians, they must retain the system of caste hierarchy, which is the very foundation of Indian social system. This is the same imperial ideology which the British follow for ruling India. That is why, the Captain of the *Ibis* does not find anything wrong with subedar Bhyro Singh's flogging of Kalua for committing the 'crime' of running away with Deeti, a high caste woman. When the American Zachary Reid expresses his disapproval of this act of Bhyro Singh and shows his dissatisfaction, the Captain says:

> For this you should know, gentleman, that there is an unspoken pact between the white man and the natives who sustain his power in Hindoosthan- it is that in matters of marriage and procreation, like must be with like, and each must keep to their own. The day the natives lose faith in us, as the guarantors of the order of castes—that will be the day, gentleman, that will doom our rule. (482)

The Captain's view reflects the imperialist view, which is systematically applied to rule the Indian colony. It is a part of the imperialist ideology not to interfere in social matters of the natives.

The Captain's leniency towards Bhyro Singh, turns him into a sadistic tormentor. Bhyro Singh is influenced by imperial ethnocentricism. His atrocity towards the migrants, and especially towards the convicts, Neel Ratan Halder and Ah Fatt, takes abnormal proportion. Bhyro Singh imagines the duo as a pair of animals, and treats them thus,

when he takes them to the deck for their daily round of exercise. For the first mate Mr. Crowle, the convicts are a butt of entertainment. It is beyond Mr. Crowle's imagination that the incident in which he forces Ah Fatt to urinate on Neel, his pal, just for the sake of entertainment and then hands him a reward, "a gobful of goatshit to boot" (459), may later bring catastrophic disaster to the crew.

The rules of the ship are strict, and applicable not only to the girmitiyas but also other coolies and lascars on board. When Jodu, a coolie employee of the *Ibis* is caught talking with Munia, a girmitiya, he receives as punishment severe flogging from Mr. Crowle :

> The first mate had a length of rope in his hands, which he was holding by its bight. Now, drawing his arm back, he lashed the knotted end of the rope across Jodu's shoulders, forcing him to his hands and knees... When next the rope came down, Jodu's arms were knocked out from under him and he fell flat on the deck-planks...A kick sent Jodu tottering for word on his hands and knees but his shoulder could not long take the weight and after few more paces, he collapsed in his stomach again... It was on the bare skin of Jodu's buttocks that the rope slammed down now and the pain forced a cry from his lips-
>
> *Allah! Bachao!* (470)

Still, the hope of a better life drives the migrants to continue their journey on board the *Ibis,* but the better life seems to be far away, perhaps not reachable at all.

As the ship sails under a clear sky, her inner ambience is clouded with conspiracy and punishment. As Bhyro Singh is not satisfied by simply expressing his open hatred for Kalua calling him "a filth-sweeper", "scavenging piece of filth" (476), he makes him victim of a conspiracy. Kalua is made to bear the punishment of sixty flogs for the accidental death of a silahdar.

Ghosh chronicles how the transporters turn tormentors, and separates the *Ibis* population into two distinct classes. The *Ibis* carries with her the social evils like caste hatred and caste oppression. But at the same time the Ibis arouses the latent courage in the victim of oppression to challenge the oppressor and let him know his existence. As Bhyro Singh approaches Kalua muttering in his ears, "Kutta! Scavenging dog! See what you've

earned for yourself? You'll be dead before I am done with you", (487-488) Kalua, for the first time in his life, summons courage to ask high-caste Bhyro, though in a whisper; "Malik – what have I ever done to you?"(488). This unexpected question from an untouchable infuriates Bhyro Singh to such an extent that muttering his deep hatred for Kalua, he starts whipping him on his back. The subedar's mocking voice, "to kill a deceiver is no sin..." (488), finally drives Kalua over the edge as he kills Bhyro Singh with the same lash which Bhyro uses for flogging him.

After that the only way out for Kalua is to jumpfrom the ship which he does with a few other men. Deepti continues on the ship.

Thus caste oppression is shown to persist beyond the village frontiers or even the boundaries of the country. The inhumanity of caste discrimination and oppression which is normally a dark aspect of rural life is shown to be an even darker chapter in the urban sphere through the plight of the refugees from Bangladesh in the Sundarbans.

The Hungry Tide

Ghosh famously threads his excursions into the history of caste oppression—or little histories of caste cleansing—by adding to Deeti's story through his recently completed Ibis trilogy. However, there are other stories of caste oppression in Ghosh—*The Hungry Tide* (2004) is a good case—though the timing of the novel's appearance and it successful reception as a story of eco-environmental degradation occlude the violent caste narrative to some extent. The infamous Morichjhapi massacre of 1979—under government orders, ironically during Communist rule—shows the hypocrisy of the ruling left in Bengal and the indifference of the Centre towards thousands of people killed there. These men and women and children—refugees from the erstwhile East Bengal—were not welcome in West Bengal because they belonged to the low caste of *Namasudras*. The story of their killing is hidden from public discourse.

These people who lived in the delta regions of erstwhile East Pakistan had fled to the Indian side when their houses were burnt down during the 1971 War. These refugees were placed in shelters in Dandakaranya in Madhya Pradesh which were like detention camps. Since these were used to living close to the water, they made plans to look for a place in the delta region of the Sundarbans, and after a lot of trouble managed to escape

from the camps. Their story is told by several characters in *The Hungry Tide*, when a diary left by a dead person is opened and the whole history unfolds.

The diary entries left by Nirmal for his nephew Kanai to see were recorded in 1979 at a place called Morichjhapi. As Kanai utters the word Morichjhapi, there is a shocked exclamation from his aunt Nilima, Nirmal's widow. When Kanai wants to know what happened she tells him:

> Morichjhãpi, said Nilima, was a tide country island a couple of hours from Lusibari by boat. It fell within a part of the Sundarbans reserved for tiger conservation, but unlike many such islands it was relatively easily accessible from the mainland. In 1978 a great number of people suddenly appeared on Morichjhãpi. In this place where there had been no inhabitants before there were now thousands, almost overnight. Within a matter of weeks they had cleared the mangroves, built bãdhs and put up huts. It happened so quickly that in the beginning no one even knew who these people were. But in time it came to be learned that they were refugees, originally from Bangladesh. Some had come to India after Partition, while others had trickled over later. In Bangladesh they had been among the poorest of rural people, oppressed and exploited both by Muslim communalists and by Hindus of the upper castes.
>
> "Most of them were Dalits, as we say now," said Nilima. "Harijans, as we used to say then."
>
> But it was not from Bangladesh that these refugees were fleeing when they came to Morichjhãpi; it was from a government resettlement camp in central India. In the years after Partition the authorities had removed the refugees to a place called Dandakaranya, deep in the forests of Madhya Pradesh, hundreds of miles from Bengal.
>
> "They called it resettlement," said Nilima, "but people say it was more like a concentration camp or a prison. The refugees were surrounded by security forces and forbidden to leave. Those who tried to get away were hunted down.' (118)

Nilima explains that these people tried to escape because they could not adjust to the conditions amidst local hostility. In 1978 they decided to settle on the Sunderban island of Morichjhapi. But the Left Front government of West Bengal had declared that Morichjhapi was a protected forest reserve and they stuck to their decision to evict the settlers. Nirmal observes:

> "But these settlers weren't revolutionaries, were they?"
>
> "No," said Nilima. "Not at all. Their aims were quite straightforward. They just wanted a little land to settle on. But for that they were willing to pit themselves against the government. They were prepared to resist until the end. (119)

Kanai tries to find out why these people were killed, why the government had found it necessary to cut off all food supplies to the place so that a number of them starved to death. Those who lived to fight the government forces were gunned down in the massacre.

The recordings from Nirmal's journal tell a little more of the plight of these people as they relate it to Kusum, one of the persons who had lived in the Sunderbans:

> *We'd never seen such a place, such a dry emptiness; the earth was so red it seemed to be stained with blood. . . But no matter have how we tried, we couldn't settle there: rivers run in our heads, the tides were in our blood. . . We sent somepeople ahead, and they found the right place; it's a large empty island called Morichjhapi. For months we prepared, we sold everything we owned. But the police fell on us the moment we moved. They swarmed on the trains, they put blocks on the road – but we still would not go back; we began to walk.'* (136-137)

Nirmal explains to Nilima (He relates this in his journal):

> *I described as best I could the drama of the settlers' arrival; I told her about the quest that had brought them from their banishment in central India to the edge of the tide country; I explained their plans, their program for building a new future for themselves, their determination to create a new land in which to live.*

*To my surprise, I found she already knew about the settlers ...The government, she said, saw these people as squatters and land grabbers; there was going to be trouble; they would not be allowed to remain. (*157-158)

Nirmal records in his journal what he thinks about the developments:

Was it possible that in Morichjhapi had been planted the seeds of what might become, if not a Dalit nation, then at least a safe heaven, a place of true freedom for the country's most oppressed?(191)

He also writes about his wife's response when he asked her why she could not offer medical help to the settlers:

"Nirmal, it's impossible," she said. "Those people are squatters; that land doesn't belong to them; its government property. How can they just seize it? If they're allowed to remain, people will think every island in the tide country can be seized. What will become of the forest, the environment?" (213)

What Nirmal writes down for future reference is the story from the settler's point of view. They were not gangsters or any kind of criminals. They were ordinary people, desperate to put down roots in a place and environment they were familiar with. They fall foul of the government because the latter was under pressure from Wildlife preservation groups to make the area a wildlife reserve. The government had received funds from some of these agencies as well:

"Look. Nilima," I said, "that island, Morichjhapi, wasn't really forest, even before he settlers came. Parts of it were already being used by the government for plantations and so on. What's been said about the danger to the environment is just a sham in order to evict these people, who have nowhere else to go."(213)

Apart from its commitment to forest conservation, the communist government had decided that these low caste Bangla speaking Hindu people from Bangladesh were not welcome in West Bengal. It had already accommodated all the upper caste Hindus who had sought shelter in the state. These lower caste people were seen as liabilities of the Indian government and farmed out to Madhya Pradesh. When these people came back to the Sundarbans after a few years and refused to leave their new settlement they were brutally killed by the state machinery. There was no attempt to relocate them. This slice

of history embedded in fiction points to caste discrimination on the part of a communist government upholding socialism. Even leftists could not escape narrow caste feelings.

Each of the above novels presents the dilemmas of the caste system for the lower caste people. While in most cases the members of the lowest caste are treated as sub-human, the conduct of the upper castes engaging in such oppression proves their inhumanity. Each of the novels does this without much comment. They expose the cruelty of the people harassing or oppressing others in the name of caste. Anand's *Untouchable* shows the shameless exploitation of the low caste people who are not paid decent wages for their labour. It also shows the corruption in the upper castes as they take advantage of the less fortunate people. There is no intervention from the government agencies to protect these people from being physically abused and humiliated.

Mistry's *A Fine Balance* offers an even harsher critique of the caste system which serves as a means of exploitation for some of the more powerful people. While the low caste people show a certain resilience and a desire to improve their lot, they receive little protection from the government agencies. Here caste is shown as a matter of pure ego for the so-called upper caste *thakurs* and their jealousy cannot overlook anybody who manages to improve his lot in life. Another thing which this novel and some of the others show is the animal like behaviour of the upper castes as they engage in mindless violence without fear of retribution from the law, simply for entertainment. This is highlighted amidst decent, kind behaviour from some people especially in the urban areas.

Roy's *The God of Small Things* presents yet another kind of social division as Keralite Christians are shown to practice caste discriminations and untouchability even in their church. Like elsewhere in the country, untouchables, despite converting to Christianity, are abused and exploited. Everywhere caste appears to be linked to a power structure with the more powerful oppressing the powerless people in the name of purity, social sanction and power. Desperate measures like political membership do not help either. For the more powerful, caste remains a whip with which, they can beat the powerless common people.

Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* shows how conventions of caste sanction regular abuse of the lower caste people. This novel, too, links caste with a power structure which exposes the shameful and bizarre conduct of the powerful castes. What is noticeable about the caste system in India is that there appears to be no regulations or codes of conduct for the members of the upper castes. Sometimes, changes in location and profession help to improve the situation but mostly, the tentacles of the discriminatory caste system follow the individuals wherever they go. Each novel dealing with the evils of the caste system silently testifies to the bestiality of the members of the upper caste who use forceful dominance on the lower castes.

Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* shows the evils of the caste system in the present where even governments which are there for the protection of the people are seen to be engaging in caste profiling and discrimination. While acts of violence against the lower castes are common in the rural areas, this novel exposes the discriminatory practices of a communist government where religion should have been off its radar. This novel presents the height of atrocities against the low caste people as first, a policy of starving to death an island full of thousands of people is sanctioned by a government to be followed by a complete massacre effected by official gunfire.

Thus, as the different novels show, caste remains as convenient pretext and tool for violence by powerful section against a powerless people. Caste norms are thrown out as none of the prescriptions for the upper classes are followed. It remains an excuse for predatory behaviour and continues to split Indian society into powerful and powerless structures.