

Chapter III

The Perils of Casteism

In their critical reading of post-Independence Indian life, one of the main contributions of Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad may be a dialogue with caste (ism), or caste politics. Through the interpretative possibilities of theatrical idiom, they investigate the caste experiences in a social space, predominantly governed by the Hindu tradition of stratified hierarchy. Their plays, under discussion in the present chapter, seem to reread three domains of discursive configuration – first, the orthodox image of the Brahmin and its associated traditions of religious purity or “dharmic piety” (Bayly 370), secondly, the so-called oppressed Dalit in a (to use contemporary political jargon) ‘Manuvadi’ discriminative society and their ‘incontestable’ position of powerlessness, and thirdly, the narrative of anti-caste, emancipatory movements. The rereading leads to dismantle some predominant notions of caste reality and clearly hints at the possibility of a fresh insight into it. The age-old sanctified status of the Brahmin as the “god on earth” (Michael 24), which still wields significant power over a large part of the society and helps to create a notional superiority across the ‘touchables’ to the untouchables, is contested by the two authors (*Flowers, The Fire and the Rain, Sakharam Binder, His Fifth Woman*). Brahminic ideals are deglamourised to expose their loopholes, and untouchability and purity consciousness, which find acceptance even in some non-Brahmin castes as well, are thus challenged. The popular notion of the victimised Dalit, an issue much sensitive in the present political culture, is also addressed and critiqued (*Kanyadaan*). Its viability is boldly examined vis-à-vis an interrogation of the upper caste dominated Dalit-welfare narrative. The present chapter also examines the intervention (*Tale'-Danda*) in the politics around the anti-caste movements that discloses further nuances about caste-identity and strategic formations of subject-position. Given the present volatility around caste, the emerging perspectives may be helpful to better appreciate the situation. With these issues under focus, the present study is to infer the fuller implications of how these plays penetrate into one of India’s most persistent social realities, keeping in mind its pre/historical constructions and consolidations by different

religious and political powers and also negotiations by social thinkers, namely, M. K. Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar.

Any attempt to define caste as a social and religious system draws as varied responses as the politics around it. The origin of caste can be traced back to the time of the 'Aryan' arrival around 1500 BC (Michael 17), though it seems to have received its theoretical sanctification later in the *Manusmriti* (probably between the second century BC and the AD second century), an "encyclopaedic treatise in verse on human conduct, morality and sacred obligations" (Bayly 14). *Manusmriti* makes clear the classification of caste in terms of a hierarchy "based on occupation and degree of pollution" (Michael 17). As an ancient code of social life, caste has its inevitable religious signification, which helped its perpetuation in primitive, especially non-Brahmin, mind, as something like a divine calling to be observed out of 'dharmic' (pious) obligation. The cosmic body of Brahma gave birth to four main castes and endowed each of them with "a particular quality necessary to enact the sacrifices necessary to sustain the universe" (Michael 24). From the mouth of Brahma emerged the 'Brahmans' (Brahmins), the holiest of holies, the 'Kshatryas' i.e. warriors from the arms, the 'Vaishyas' (tillers or merchants) from the thighs, and from the feet the 'Shudras' (servants). Each of their duties was segregated from the others, and their salvation rested on the loyal observance of their respective callings. This social order of four castes (or 'varnas'), enunciated by the ancient lawgivers with the support of religious sanctification, came to be inherited by generations of people and resulted in the formation of a society marked by the principles of hierarchical stratification and segregation. The concept of untouchability (or untouchables) was a contemporary by-product of the caste system. It was articulated by the Brahmin lawgivers as a preventive measure against the 'sin' of miscegenation and disobedience to caste norms. The children of upper caste-lower caste pair became untouchables. There was variety even in the status of the untouchables, which depended on the social gap between the two parents. If the match was between a Brahmin father and a Shudra mother, the child was called 'Nishāda' (fisherman by profession); but the result was extreme if the reverse happened – a Shudra father and a Brahmin mother. The child was most degraded and condemned as 'Chandala'. The punitive concept of untouchability was, therefore, exercised solely to secure and sustain the pious authority of the Brahmins over others in an 'incontestable' normative system.

Caste has always been a “real and active part of Indian life” (Bayly 3). According to Susan Bayly, caste consciousness in the formation of social order, however, becomes increasingly evident only in the post-Mughal and pre-British period (5) and gradually comes to be substantiated during the Raj owing to colonial administrative policies towards the native population. By virtue of forging broad allegiances across geo-linguistic-economic groups as well as disempowering certain sections of people, caste always remains in close proximity to the rulers, Hindu and non-Hindu alike, and their state policies. “To rule was to name, order and classify” (Bayly 369), and rulers have often proved to play active role in endorsing caste-specific identities of their subjects so as to capitalise on the disharmony of stratified existence. Before the Islamic rule the Brahmin interest was well secured by the Kshatrya rulers, who required the support of the sacred to their political power. The mutual needs often called for alliance between these two castes that normally wanted to see the perpetuation of this hierarchy (Ingalls 212). The Muslim rulers, in fact many of them, were also rational enough to see the talents of the Brahmins and other upper castes which could be utilised in more than one way for the advantage of the state and, as a result, continued to endorse the caste system (Bayly 369) in a manner that consolidated hierarchical segregation as never before. This perhaps resulted in an emergence of caste consciousness, more rigid than before, under non-Hindu rule where “Indians found advantage in embracing the tradition of dharmic piety” (Bayly 370). Another factor which might greatly accelerate caste formation, particularly among the elites, was the need to retain distinguished socio-religious identity uninterrupted by foreign interventions, an urge that was later witnessed in the nationalist narrative against British colonialism as well. During the post-Mughal period, the hectic exercises of state (re)formation brought caste consciousness/affinities, till then being utilised mostly by the ruling class (the Muslims), to the fore again in a more evident manner (Bayly 369). They came to be utilised to forge broad alliances among people (the Hindu subjects) so that new states or empires could be formed (Bayly 370). A desire to revive the Brahminic formulation of caste order with the aim of consolidating the culture of purity, as distinctive and autonomous, became powerful. The revivalist desire began to re-assert the purity of body as the essence of caste system, which hierarchically demarcated different groups within an organic order. The physical purity of the upper caste body and the mutual separation of different endogamous caste groups were heavily insisted upon, and it resulted in a revival and consolidation of the mythic upper caste (read ‘Brahminhood’) chiefly on the basis of the purity of body. This rendered the society, in general, crudely

caste conscious, a condition which was later exploited by the British through a much more sophisticated version of state apparatus and policies.

Caste as a social institution captured the colonial imagination for more than one reason, chief of which was its perceived status that it “centrally and essentially characterised Indian society as radically different from Western society . . .” (Chatterjee, *The Nation* 173). This essentialist position of caste as the marker of ‘difference’ proved useful as it helped to legitimise the colonial superiority to the premodern society. During this period, the colonial engagement with caste reshaped it as more systematically ranked, standardised and applied code of social existence through multiple caste-specific laws and policies. The always-already caste-informed Indian society became explicitly caste-conscious owing to the formation of armies on caste lines (a policy still practised after Independence) and, also, “modern colonial city” (Bayly 372) comprising numerous forms of official-social occupation and labour, such as burning-ground attendants, pollution-removers, municipal sweepers, tanners, factory hands. It is indeed a debatable matter as to whether the transfer of power in 1947 has contributed significantly to minimise caste oppressions. Independent India’s constitutional guarantee for social justice undoubtedly indicates the change of guard in ‘Lutyens’ Delhi’ (after Edwin Lutyens, the chief architect of colonial Delhi), but much remains to be answered as numerous modernising policies of the state continue to inherit the colonial baggage left over by the Raj. A whole list of post-colonial recycling of colonial caste stereotypes stands obvious (Bayly 275; Chatterjee *The Nation* 204). It ranges from the caste regiments of the Indian Army, the Census, the civil service, the civil and criminal laws to the operations of the Anthropological Survey of India. The emergence of a Dalit consciousness during 1970s effectively intervenes in the continuity of casteist oppression, but the promise of social justice still remains a far cry. The constitutional urgency to strike a balance between the creation of a secular-casteless republic on the one hand and, on the other, the arrangement for the caste-based compensatory discrimination to safeguard the historically disadvantaged sections seems to have failed to produce its desired result. An appropriate solution is still pending. The state declares the steadfast abolition of casteism and untouchability (Article 17) in more than one constitutional way (Jogdand qtd. in Michael 316-17). But the compensatory discrimination policy (Article 46), notwithstanding its rationale for creating a “level playing field for the perennially disadvantaged” (S. Kar 6), seems to create caste specificities that expedite segregation and unlock “vested interests” (R. Kothari 1589).

These vested groups initiate politics of reservation and quota, rendering the policy a “vote-catching device” (Bayly 296). Further, this constitutional provision is misused by the (much debated) “creamy layer” (Palshikar 8) that steals away the majority benefit depriving the truly needy ones (R. Kothari 1593). The absence of a self-sufficient mechanism to address the loopholes makes the provision a tool to perpetuate rather than eliminate the caste problems (Bayly 7). The whole issue of caste(ism) snowballs in the socio-political life mostly in the late 1980s with the alleged ‘Mandalisation’/‘casteisation’ of politics, i.e. the political impact of the Mandal Commission recommendations for extended caste-reservation. Thenceforth, Indian political discourse exhibits an unprecedented preoccupation with caste-specific/casteist jargons to gain political mileage, putting issues of development backstage. The multi-faceted tradition of anti-caste(ism) movements, initiated by divergent figures such as Gandhi and Ambedkar, seems to have been tight-legged in the murky politics, and almost all anti-caste exercises despairingly hover on the ‘race for quota’, dismissing the possibilities of any productive discourse. The political exigencies render most initiatives appeasement-centric and prevent them from being the tools of “abolishing the continuing sources of tangible disadvantage of our unequal and unjust society” (Deshpande and Yadav. 2424). In this highly politicised context of caste, different notions of caste-identities are always worth reconsideration as they can offer new significances.

The image of the pure and refined Brahmin becomes problematic in the present caste-conscious/caste-exploitative society. In today’s political relocation, Brahmins seem to have lost much of their inherited power, and the credit perhaps goes to two factors. First, the growing strategic needs of realpolitik, arguably, consider the Brahmins a political minority powerless enough, against a vast number of disadvantaged, to be disregarded in the political game of ‘numbers’. The loss of political agency of the Brahmins takes a heavy toll on their stature and renders them displaced from their erstwhile position of authority. They stand as a politically less-powerful category which cannot influence power owing to its small size and segregated nature and therefore fails to receive any attention from the same. Secondly, the emergence of the Dalit consciousness, which comes as a corollary of the Ambedkar movement and the continuous tradition of caste disparity, brings the Brahminic piety and authority before sheer contestation. The pro-active configuration of the Dalit voice of dissent and a ‘liberatory’ category called the ‘Dalit’ takes away much of the shine from the mythical Brahminhood. Under the new

circumstances, the Brahmins seem to stand as an ordinary, demythologised category comparatively less-influential and less-powerful than other caste categories. Thus the age-old class of power seems to suffer a socio-cultural displacement and reflect new significations of powerlessness, which were originally associated with the traditional caste-Other(s).

Tendulkar's *Sakharam Binder*, *His Fifth Woman* and Karnad's *Flowers, The Fire and the Rain* can be read as critical probes into the contemporary de-mythologized Brahmin subject. He has indeed been reduced from his "inviolable" (Dumont 69) status of a "great deity" (Ketkar 161) and "an eternal incarnation of the sacred law" (Indradeva qtd. in Sharma 47) to an ordinary caste-group among many others. However, the plays, here, study this group from the view-point of neither the current realpolitik of 'numbers' nor the emergent Dalit discourse. On the contrary, they try to understand the 'commonplace' in Brahmin-life hidden behind the norms of purity and piety. Their humane desire, lust, anger and jealousy come to the fore to contest their mythic divinity. The contestation assumes significance because it takes place against the contemporary socio-political backdrop of the demotion of the Brahmin status, though for altogether different reasons.

Although the Brahminic background is an additional attribute in Sakharam's character (*Sakharam Binder*) and serves chiefly as a contributing factor to the atmosphere of shock and surprise in this play of sex and sexuality, the Bohemian Brahmin is a perfect example of how Tendulkar wants to see the myth busted. Sakharam is "coarse" (125) and opposed to the Brahminic soft, weak and feminine disposition – one that Karnad's Devadatta (*Hayavadana*) is bestowed with. He is born in a Brahmin family but becomes like a "Mahar, a dirty scavenger" (127) for his "don't care" (125) attitude and being allegedly "a rascal, a womanizer, a pauper" (126). But most importantly, he is a proud "Mahar", who can take on the given world of customs and traditions to pull it upside down. As if fed up with the hypocrisy of rituals and oppressive religion, he wants to throw aside his religious and caste identity and create a domain – "Sakharam Binder's palace" (127) – where he can re-write norms on his own terms, which are clearly anti-Brahminical, sometimes even at the risk of being a male chauvinist.

Sakharam's anti-caste/religion stand is reflected in each and every corner of his "red-tiled house" (125). His tongue-in-cheek attitude to the gods and goddesses (127, 142) comes as a slap on his born Brahminhood. He rises above religious prejudice in his friendship with Dawood. But his violent beating of Laxmi when she disallows Dawood to participate in the 'aarti' (chanting of the holy scriptures) makes his anti-religion status extraordinary. The amount of ruthlessness he shows to maintain his 'code' of order dismisses any scope of the so-called Brahminic pity. Sakharam's violence is combined with his seemingly inexhaustible desire for sex. He brings in destitute women who are rejected by all but sexually still capable. Outside the institution of marriage, he keeps them in his home and provides food and shelter in exchange of sex. He claims to be dispassionate about his sex-objects as he mechanically brings in a new woman to fill the gap of the old one. However, his claim proves futile at the end. He murders Champa out of his sexual jealousy that was excited by Laxmi. A sensualist and violent man now guilty of homicide, Sakharam totally stands opposed to the mythic Brahmin and his piety and purity.

Sakharam's anti-Brahmin/caste status can best be understood if his character is seen together with his reappearance on the stage after nearly thirty-two years. *His Fifth Woman* (2004) is written as a prequel to *Sakharam Binder* (1972). The interrogation of the rigid, orthodox Brahmin ideals continues in this play. It enacts the situation immediately after the death of the fifth woman in Sakharam's life. She precedes Laxmi and Champa. The sharp irony and humour of the play and its deft fusion of fact and fancy in a pseudo-real world show Tendulkar's ceaseless energy to explore reality in a manner which grows bolder on the strength of mature cynicism. Beside being a critique of sexuality, the play interrogates Brahminhood in a more direct manner than its sequel. The play is special for several reasons. It was written at the behest of The Lark Play Development Center as a part of the Tendulkar Festival sponsored by the Indo-American Arts Council in New York. So in all probability, Tendulkar had to be aware of an American audience while composing the play. This is, perhaps, reflected in the economy and preciseness of expression. Originally meant for staged reading in the Festival, the dialogues are sharp and concise in their irony and humour. The play was also one that Tendulkar had penned after a long break. Most importantly, he writes a play in English for the first time. Initially, he had doubts about its success (Warner 43). But what finally comes out is a "marvellous addition to the world of *Sakharam Binder*" (Warner 44).

Although a bit younger, Sakharam still shows the same gusto for his don't-care style. He remains abusive and proud as well. His "deal" (56) with women continues, and he is never ashamed of it. For he believes, he is not a hypocrite to hide anything and will never live according to someone else's wishes. He does not want to perform the customary last rites of the fifth woman whose name he does not even know. But he finally yields to the pressure of Dawood, the only person he lends an ear to, and agrees to do the rites. The play's critique of the Brahminic insistence on rule-bound piety begins when the scene shifts to the funeral site. The entire process of the last rites is ironically presented, exposing the hollow within the rigid and rule-centric religiosity.

Scene Three at the burning 'ghat' is the theatrical space for contestation. An unwilling Sakharam is nearly forced by Dawood, his Muslim friend, to perform the last rites of the dead woman. The Hindu burning 'ghat' is invested with black humour as it shows signs of moral and religious degeneration. People who come to perform the last rites of their near ones are totally unaffected by the loss and interested more in monetary matters or will of the dead than anything else. They jokingly discuss about the rise in kerosene price making the last rites costlier. Social scandals also feature as crispy topics. Sakharam is guided by a Brahmin on the rites with Dawood helping from a safe distance. The business-like manner of the supposedly holy rites, which involves the unbeliever Sakharam, the commercial priest and a serio-comic Muslim helper, makes the entire episode look like an exercise in irony. All the three characters seem to know quite well the futility of the rites but are guided by their respective obligations to participate. For Dawood, it is the sudden opportunity of getting helpful and serving somebody whom he called 'bhabhi' (sister-in-law). For Sakharam, it is merely Dawood's insistence and a waning pity for the miserable woman. The Brahmin priest, on the other hand, is purely motivated by his financial profit and ready to overlook all the oddities with money being pressed into his hand by Dawood. The dark humour mounts to the peak when the crows refuse to eat the food. Traditionally, the food on a banana leaf is placed on the ground for the crows to eat. It is believed that the crows are the earthly incarnations of the dead souls and their accepting the food indicates the satisfaction of those whom they represent. But if they refuse, it means that the dead souls are still dissatisfied with the rites and unwilling to quit the world. In such a case, the custom advises to convince the crows by promising the dead souls the fulfilment of their desires. Their conviction will depend on the level of

sincerity in the promise. In spite of Sakharam's promise and then words of abuse and request, the crows turn a deaf ear to him and do not touch the food, pointing to his insincere promise. But they jump on the food the moment he doubts that they perhaps ally themselves with the priests in order to extract money from the relations of the dead. This gesture proves that Sakharam's doubt about the crows is true because, according to the belief, the crows will respond to truth alone. There exists, as it were, a nexus between them and the Brahmin priests. The target is the common man who is gagged by bizarre set of religious rules and norms.

The last part of the burning 'ghat' episode is the most powerful critique of religiosity. The crows' accepting the food is ironical because it undermines the religious sanctity associated with such gesture and exposes the shabby condition of some Brahminical rites, relying largely on the impression of mechanical austerity to survive. The rules, meant for serving the dead and their bereaved relations, no longer stand for them. They are, on the contrary, customised to serve some vested interest-groups. They offer financial opportunities to the priests and an occasion for social obligation to the disinterested relatives. All claims to afterlife become farce as the magical crows point out the hollowness of the system itself. Thus we have a sardonic picture of a rule-bound world inhabited by people, who either exploit its norms for personal benefit or flout them openly or undermine them through ironical conformity. The world of Brahminic purity is already subverted in the earlier play, *Sakharam Binder*, which is in fact the chronological prequel. But the subversion of this world becomes more sarcastic and humorously critical in style in the thematic prequel, *His Fifth Woman*.

The preoccupation with an impersonal world of rigid rules and a notion of inviolable piety often reaches an unnecessary level. Girish Karnad's monologue *Flowers* (2004) critiques this obsession with the normative excesses. In Karnad's dramatic oeuvre, this monologic form is a novel experiment that, perhaps, becomes theatrically more powerful in his other monologue *Broken Images* (2004). This technical experiment is matched with an experiment in subject as well (Dharwadker, *Introduction* xxxi). It is about suppressed male sexual desire. The play shows the difficulties of a circumscribed life of religious austerity that constrains the natural desires of a male. The Brahminic ideals, which rely on the piety of the mind and the body, are confronted with a Brahmin subject who is split between the callings of tradition and his life-long repressed desires.

The confrontation is immensely productive as it reveals the un-accommodative nature of religious configurations based on a superficial manifestation of purity and their suppressive understanding of the human mind. Karnad makes use of the folktale of Veeranna, popularised by the Kannada writer T.R. Subbanna in his novel *Hamsageethe* (1952). Veeranna was a married priest, who lied about his mistress's hair in the 'prasada', called it God's hair and discovered, to his utter surprise as well as of all, that God (the 'Shivalinga') indeed sprouted long silken hair. When a tuft of hair was pulled out to verify its originality, blood began to trickle from the wound of the 'lingam'. Submerged into a sense of sin, Veeranna committed suicide. By his typical style of appropriating the resources of folklore to understand modern experiences, private and public alike, Karnad recasts the legend of Veeranna. The purpose is to critically read the male subjectivity which is highly regulated by an ascetic regime of Brahminic discipline. The irony, which derives from the fact that a male/Brahmin-made system has become oppressive to one of its members who never consciously contemplates dissention, undermines the very qualitative nature of the system. Its mode of operation becomes debatable for its misplaced emphases that disregard the human subject for the sake of impersonal rules and misconceive a notion of piety and pollution.

The monologue of the unnamed priest presents a ritualised life dedicated exclusively to the service of the 'Shivalinga' in the village temple. It is his private domain guarded by indissoluble customs and traditions. The daily ritual of flower art over the 'linga' is his sort of worship of the divine. At the time of the floral decoration, he becomes lost in it; so much so that "the linga is my step-wife" (244), as complains his wife. But this adulation of the divine symbol betrays the circumscribed existence, where life has become mechanically ritualised and monotonous within the ossified wall of norms. Behind the praise and admiration of the devotees as well as of the ruler lies his suppressed desperation for having no free space.

The culture of purity and pollution of the Brahminic ideals is pervasive. It does not only limit itself within the temple precinct but also proliferates in other domains to determine subjectivity. The domestic world of the priest is an extension of his temple. His home which comprises his parents, wife and two children exhibits 'dharmic' refinement and restraint. It is a Brahmin's domain which must be made different from a lower caste house, say a Dalit one, where drunken fathers beat mothers and make love with them

before their children, all in their muddy gutters (Tendulkar, *Kanyadaan* 44). In such a context of religious/caste regulation, woman seems to bear upon a dual oppression; one springs from the immediate situation of religious/caste supervision, and the other comes from the traditional obedience to patriarchy which chiefly formulates these disciplinary systems. Wifehood, in the priest's home, is quite normally subjected to such dual regulation that produces a dutiful, pious wife, who even shivers at the thought of full-fledged sex with her husband lest it should awake the entire household and she should see herself naked beside her husband. When the tired body of the priest comes back home after the strenuous ritual in the temple, it meets a woman's body equally (or even more) circumscribed by the binary of piety and pollution. The suppression of subjective desire multiplies resulting in a growing loss of space for all.

The only "breach in the invisible defences" (245) occurs when Ranganayaki, the affluent prostitute, visits the temple and catches the eyes which are hitherto unfamiliar with what it means to be lust for a woman. The corollary emasculation fast creeps in, but the "fire" (245) is hard to control. Then starts a passionate affair uncapped after years' repression. Suddenly, the mind begins to un-coat customs and runs to the prostitute's house after the evening puja to re-utilise the flowers on her bronzed nudity. Tradition appears to be weak and cannot hold against this outburst of passion inasmuch as Ranga's body and her house provide a better alternative to both, the 'linga' and the temple or also to his Brahminic home. First, the magical curves, indents and shapes of her body which inflame the imagination of a floral artist are missing in the smooth, bland and stony phallus. The living quality of the object of worship weighs more than the visibly lifeless stony stump that cannot even give a slightest note of appreciation to his brilliance. His heart still beats for the 'linga' since he grows with it, but Ranga's body kindles the hidden fire within and therefore proves irresistible. Secondly, the prostitute's house totally undermines the holy precinct of the temple and also the customary validity of the Brahminic home. Ranga's exotic chamber outshines the lifeless temple that only offers the monotony of rituals. Further, her chamber dismisses the rigidly formulated Brahmin home as a circumscribed state of existence, where the idea of sex-for-pleasure is rejected as un-Brahminic. It is a home where human instincts are to be conditioned according to the given norms. The priest laments,

At home, we all bathed in the open, in the corner formed by the neem and the banyan trees in our backyard, so my wife covered herself with a sari

even when she bathed. On the days I wanted her, I would give her a look she had come to recognize and late at night when everyone was fast asleep, she would crawl up to my room for a *furtive scuffle* in bed which demanded the minimum of uncovering. There were our two children and my old parents in the house and you never know who might call out for help. (my emphasis) (248-49)

The basic problem, however, lies somewhere else. The discursive home administers the construction of a particular wife who must be chaste and dutiful. Such codified category as chaste and dutiful wife falls in sharp contrast to the prostitute whose socio-cultural position makes her immune to similar regulations, as she is conditioned by her category of 'impurity'. Her external status to this regime of purity renders her alluring to the repressed priest, who now finds the 'linga' as simplified dullness and his dharmic and chaste wife as a "wet rag" (253) with "all excitement for life drained out of her" (253).

If the priest's involvement with Ranganayaki devalues the religious norms, his miraculous acquittal from the alleged blasphemy is another way of undermining the oppressive system. As the news of his nocturnal adventure spreads all across, the ruler plans for a sudden visit to the temple at the late hour of night to confirm his alleged absence. He has to free all the flowers from Ranga's naked body and run back frantically to the temple in order to reuse them on the holy 'linga' before the ruler comes in. But in his hurry, he forgets to clean the flowers before using them on God, and the ruler discovers a long strand of hair tangled in the flower given to him for his 'prasada'. This act is now labelled as a blatant evidence of his heinous sin of redecorating God with the "polluted discards" (256) of a prostitute's body. He is alleged to have subverted the traditional binary of purity and impurity and invited God's retribution. In this critical condition, his tumultuous consciousness replies, "If we believe that God has long hair . . . He will have long hair" (257). It is the only reply that he could give under such circumstances. But now he has to prove his claim. After twelve days when the door of the inner sanctum opens, all awe-struck eyes witness "waves of jet black hair" (258) billowing out from the 'Shivalinga'. When a courtier pulls out a tuft of hair from it, the inanimate stone-stump bleeds. General scepticism suddenly gives way to mass hysteria over and adoration of the priest and lifts him to the status of a saint.

Paranormal miracle adds to the ironical power of folk tales that are known for their plurality of meaning and contestation from within. Such use of miracle as ironically questioning the validity of a prevailing order is found in Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* as well. Rani puts her hand inside the cave of the cobra and stays alive just because the cobra does not bite anybody who speaks truth. This miracle helps bring an entire oppressive system under question. The mysterious hair of God has also a similar purpose that seeks to question the system from within. First, through its deification of the priest it seems to draw a divine validation of the Brahmin's alleged immorality. Although he is blasphemous to the society and fallen even to his own eyes by all norms, God thinks otherwise! To Him, the priest's piety remains intact even after his sexual laxity, which is considered the most dreaded sin by any religious standard. God's different judgement, which is the paranormal miracle here, seems to undermine this social system of validation that misplaces its emphases. Piety of the soul is overlooked for a recognisable piety of the body to create a visible system of discipline. God's intervention subverts the basic principles of the discipline, leaving its outer structure intact. Secondly, the mysterious hair exposes the cognitive deficiency of the institutionalised religion. The easy transition from scepticism to veneration suggests its fallacy about the purity and contamination of human soul. The punitive crowd promptly becomes apologetic about their misreading of the priest and ready to believe in his asceticism. Their switch-over, which apparently glorifies Brahminic austerity, originally exposes the unnecessary preoccupation with unalterable rules and serves to de-legitimise their understanding of religion. It reveals how conveniently the definitions of purity and pollution are made/remade. When something incomprehensible (God's hair) comes before them, the crowd readily believes the present 'illogic' (the so-called purity of the priest) to get rid of the past 'illogic' (his so-called pollution). The use of the divine intervention is, thus, manifold. It is a marvellous tool of exposure. As a device of irony, it apparently assures the society of the priest's ascetic purity but challenges the preconceptions about that purity from within. It is a typical folk instrument that ensures a 'complex-view' of the situation without overt disavowal of it. The obsession with body-centric purity is challenged, and the people's superficial understanding of purity and pollution also becomes evident. Finally, all is achieved, and the institutional religion also stands intact, though emptied from within.

The final blow to orthodoxy is provided by the self-immolation of the priest – an act that seems to highlight another aspect of the miracle. As a theatrical device of

exposure, the miracle contests the popular notion of purity, certifies the priest's self-purity and exposes the fallacy of religious understanding. But it also presents a case, where an individual is shelled back into the circumscribed condition which he tries to transcend and where subjective freedom has no place. His deification, owing to the miracle, brings more restriction than before. He is "the state saint now, to be prized, protected and shown off to visiting envoys." (259). He loved God and still loves him. All he wanted was the courage to live like a normal human being, even "to live in disgrace" (259). But there lies the limitation of institutionalised religion. It remains suppressive and contractile even in its glorification. It makes him saint but unmakes his normal life. In this perspective, God's recognition of his innocence seems to be problematic. To God Himself, the priest might seem innocent and therefore He rescues him from punishment. But God's magical act ultimately proves suppressive because it brings more restraint on the priest's life. To the common people, the divine hair proves that the priest is still 'pure'. Thus, it glorifies the prevailing narrative of purity and pollution. Ideally, God's act might justify the priest, but in reality it re-asserts the norm of purity, which the priest opposes. The self-immolation at the end is therefore the priest's disavowal of this rigid orthodoxy. He dies not because of any fear for social castigation or sense of sin. He dies to protest. "God must understand I simply cannot live on His terms." (260).

Flowers can be viewed as a study of how religious orthodoxy can heavily restrict subjectivity. The Brahmin priest's psychological conflict between erotic love and religious responsibility, which is dramatised as the "triangulated desire" (Dharwadker, *Introduction* xxxii) between a man and two women, ends in his self-immolation. His repressed life looks for a break from rigidity and exposes an equally repressed domesticity where his wife betrays the burden of double conformity; one is to the traditional patriarchy, and the other to the Brahminic/religious obsession with piety. For the priest it becomes ironical because he has to suffer at the hand of a system which has been historically formulated by male prerogatives. The play's significance multiplies when it is read as a text on Brahminic/religious excesses vis-à-vis male desire. It then exhibits the process of contesting the 'incontestable', relying chiefly on folklore's strength of irony. The style of monologue seems to befit the situation because it aptly captures the sense of a lone act of confessional self-defence in the court of socio-religious persecution. As the priest goes near the temple tank to drown himself, he rewinds his past experience in a long utterance, leaving multiple questions before the authority, bestowed

with the sole power of questioning. He is alone in his 'impure' act, and his loneliness is also supported by his lone figure on the stage. The monologue has all the potentials to be successful on the stage, but lot will depend on the individual execution of the actor in the priest's role.

The Brahminic world of ascetic order is again examined in Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain (Agni Mattu Male)*. The play relives the ancient rite of fire sacrifice ('yajna') as the central metaphor in its theatrical fabric and unfurls its subject through the multiple implications of this metaphor. In his explanatory addendum to the text, Karnad has referred to the varied relation between fire sacrifice and theatre. In the Vedantic society, the spiritual sense of sacrifice was integral to the Brahminic life (Karnad, *The Fire and the Rain* 69). In almost all the possible ways of life, be it academic discussions, love-making, or marriage, the importance of 'yajna' was undeniable. Theatre, which was considered the *Fifth Veda* or the *Natya Veda* in Bharata's *Natyashastra*, has lot of parallels with fire sacrifice. In fact, a whole range of striking similarities can be drawn between these two apparently unrelated domains. Both stand close together in terms of "human performances, precise gesture, speech, and a carefully worked out action leading to a predetermined denouement" (Karnad, *The Fire and the Rain* 69). But, more importantly, both have the "perennial possibility of disruption" (Karnad, *The Fire and the Rain* 69). From inside, it might be sabotaged by any of its own members, and from outside the disruption might come from the demons (in the case of sacrifice) and the audience (in the case of theatre). And to prevent this disruption, there were the Chief Priest of 'yajna' and the director of drama. On the other hand, difference is also visible in the relation. 'Yajna' was exclusive and disallowed the non-Brahmins to enter its inner precincts, whereas theatre was to be performed by the 'shudras'. A casteist as well as ironical prejudice can be found in the co-existence of these two. Theatre was performed within the premises of sacrifice as a way to please Lord Indra who handed over this *Fifth Veda* to Bharata (2). Further, it was allowed within the premises because it offered a comic relief to the strenuous rituals (Karnad, *The Fire and the Rain* 67). But the irony was that it had to perform at a safe distance from the sanctum for its non-Brahmin denomination.

With the mixed relation between 'yajna' and theatre in his mind, Karnad situates the fire sacrifice at the centre of his thematic design to achieve multiple purposes. First,

through a detail engagement with the different nuances of the sacrifice he builds up a rigid Brahminic world. Secondly, the construction of this Brahminic world through the sacrificial metaphor inherently embodies the possibility of subversion. Thus the normative world, so created, logically presents a base for (self-)contestation. Different subject-positions, from within/without, (e.g. Parvasu, Arvasu, Nittilai) are shown to problematise the order. Thirdly, the casteist dichotomy between the sacrifice and theatre creates another possibility of critiquing the Brahminic world. Through the opposition of a Brahminic tradition, such as fire sacrifice, to a non-Brahminic culture e.g. theatre, the casteist Brahminic world is made to stand before a probe. The presence of theatre and performance in the plot facilitates the probe and serves as a base for countering of the dominant thought by the dominated. However, the countering between the Brahminic and the non-Brahminic worlds is never simplistic in this play. The complex association of 'yajna' and theatre, both being two complementary and contradictory strands of a religious system, renders this countering complicated. The challengers themselves, e.g. the tribal, sometimes display suppressive mindset that they supposedly challenge.

The use of mythology provides authenticity to the Brahminic world of purity and discipline in the play. Karnad chiefly draws on the myths of Yavakri and Vritra, both of which occur in the *Mahabharata*, and recasts them to construct a system of life that tends to be impersonally and superficially normative. Life here centres on inviolable customs and seeks sustenance from divine rules to perpetuate them. When there is a drought for ten years, the mythological land surrenders itself to the fire sacrifice, a customary rite in ancient Indian society, to please Indra, the god of rain. The image of sacrifice as the sole and sacred way to redemption is built up through the well-knit plot. It will be a seven years' long process of ritual that goes on through a sustained and uninterrupted observation of rules. It is obviously the sole prerogative of the Brahmins to conduct the rite. The king of the land is the financial sponsor, who endorses such an event as to have the blessings of the gods and priests, but within the sacrificial precincts the priest speaks the last word owing to his "contextual superiority to his patron, a superiority derived from his knowledge of the ritual and his indispensability" (Srinivas 11). It seems to be a perfect marriage between politics and religion for the sake of mutual sustenance. The entire precinct must be pure and clean, which means it is sex-free and lower-caste-free. The participants, i.e. the priests, cannot go outside, have sex even with their wives and talk with the lower-castes till the end of the rite. Parvasu, the son of Raibhya, is chosen as the

chief priest of the sacrifice for his knowledge, youth and piety. His selection demands sacrifice as he has to renounce his newly wed wife and conjugal romance for an ascetic life. For the chief priest, the religious honour counts above all material ordinaries. The lower-castes cannot participate in it; nor can they even enter the precincts. Theatre, though considered an integral part of the entire performance of the sacrifice, is held as the domain of the lower-castes and, therefore, denied proximity to the sanctum. Parvasu's younger brother, Arvasu, violates his order, "If you value your Brahminhood, don't act on stage" (30), and gets demoted to the Shudrahood. He, again, becomes a non-Brahmin for his alleged patricide, which is also a disqualification for the sacrifice. Through such opposition between qualitative states (knowledge/ignorance, profligacy/asceticism, Brahmin/non-Brahmin, pure/impure), a sacred image of the sacrifice as a Brahminic virtue is created.

The Brahminic aura gets sanctified through many other manifestations of religious austerity and divine power. Yavakri, the son of Bharadwaja, goes to the jungle for a rigorous meditation for ten years. The objective is to achieve the "Universal Knowledge" (13) through a stringent method of worship. Although it is to level his spiritual status with the Raibhya family, Yavakri's feat highlights Brahminic sacrifice and spiritual concentration. He indeed masters magical power to destroy his opponent but proves to be beaten by luck and Raibhya's superior power. The sacrifice itself proves to be beneficial for the people as Indra, the rain-god, reveals at the end and showers rain over the drought-affected land. The abundance of such magical and paranormal events, which is an essential feature of mythology, is skilfully used by Karnad to build up a world maintained and monitored by the Brahmin power. Their austerity, discipline, meditation and divine power make them exclusive and superlative in the social hierarchy.

The superior world of piety, which is created largely around the central metaphor of sacrifice, however, carries along with it the possibility of contestation. The sacrosanct code of life often proves to be ironical. They are inviolable, but their austerity seems to betray their vulnerability and render them debatable. The excessive preoccupation with an impersonal set of rules proves self-degenerating and prepares a ground for subversive challenges that may come both from within and outside. The challenges from within arise from the strictest supporters of the system whose ruthless conformity only helps undermine the solid garb of rationalisation. They upheld the system through self-

exemplification and contain any dissention by either coercion or co-option. But the very strategy of maintenance interrogates the validation, resulting in an unmasking of the system. Yavakri, who is renowned for his extraordinary meditation and spiritual power, is one prominent example. He seems to be the only Brahmin who performs the most stringent of meditations for ten years and meets the god, Indra Himself. This feat of spiritual excellence glorifies not only Yavakri but also the entire Brahmin order for its unwavering faith and tenacity. But Yavakri himself problematises his glorified act. He struggled for the spiritual power not for any universal knowledge (13) but to settle score with the Raibhya family. He had to master the mystical art to avenge the injustice meted out to his family. Apart from such a selfish motive, his description of the meditation to Vishakha, Paravasu's wife, seems to de-glorify the act. The hard life in the jungle infested with flies, giants, pests, leeches is compounded by the uncertainty surrounding the appearance of the god. It is not simple because the gods appear only in response to the rigorous penance and grant prayers. Yavakri himself was unsure about his encounter with the god. After a period of ceaseless meditation, he drew the conclusion that he met the god, be it his hallucination or fever in brain (13), and came back to declare himself victorious. This deglamourised depiction of an act, considered highly prestigious and desirable, turns it upside down and presents it as the whimsical expression of the Brahmin ego. Apart from challenging the myth of selfless meditation, Yavakri also undermines the Brahminic ideals of morality and ascetic purity. His main ambition is always to destroy the Raibhya clan, and for this he plans to revive his pre-marriage affair with Vishakha only in order to malign her in-laws. His unscrupulous scheme to gratify self-interest does not only destroy his defamed life but also presents an ordinary picture of a Brahmin, who is self-centric and devious.

Raibhya and his son Paravasu are the two other forces that contest the pious image of Brahmin from within. In Karnad's adaptation of the myth, the father-son relation exhibits the presence of a murky politics over the question of priestly authority. Both are learned and widely respected, but their virtues are overpowered by a keen desire for earthly power and authority. The sanctified position of the Chief Priest in the fire sacrifice proves too alluring for them to renounce. And it is more for the social prestige associated with it than any higher and spiritual yearn that they become hostile to each other. Raibhya's displeasure at the king's choice of Paravasu for the highly sought-after position is evident in his contemptuous and even lustful attitude to Vishakha, his daughter-in-law.

But Parvasu appears to be more calculative than his father. Incensed at Vishakha's report of his father's deep-rooted jealousy for him and lecherous character, he cleverly eliminates him so that it looks like an accident. As if not enough, he asks the naïve and theatre-loving Arvasu to perform the last rite of their dead father with a hidden plan to accuse him of patricide. A Brahmin is inviolable and cannot be killed (Dumont 69), and Arvasu's alleged sin is sure to condemn him to a position, from where he can never challenge his elder brother's stake in spiritual inheritance. *The Fire and the Rain* is indeed a composite illustration of the cycle of intrigue and revenge, reminiscent of the Greek tragedies. This legacy of conspiring jealousy and suspicion projects two of these eminent priests and their operations in a murky light, resulting in a devaluation of their sacred category.

Vishakha, the most important female character in the play, gains importance less for being a dissenting member of a renowned Brahmin family than for her identity as a self-assertive female. She contests the Brahmin patriarchy mainly from her sense of suppressed femininity. She proposes to challenge the circumscribed condition of betrayal rather than assailing any specific Brahmin order. Her betrayed womanhood compels her to speak out against her husband's selfish masculinity and her father-in-law's lechery and formulate a strategy for revenge (aka self-empowerment). She is unconcerned about any opposition between Brahminic and non-Brahminic worlds and not interested in holding the Brahminic order of her household solely responsible for her misery. What she exposes is the manipulative and pretentious masculinity of Yavakri, Raibhya and Parvasu, which, combined with other social peculiarities like caste consciousness, creates a comprehensive system of sexual exploitation. Vishakha's contestation, which is motivated purely by her sexual deprivation, is therefore a challenge from the outside. More a manipulated woman than a manipulated Brahmin woman, she disturbs the sacred order by her sexual assertion. Either through the revived Yavakri-affair or by manipulating Parvasu to kill Raibhya, she critiques the self-centric, impersonal socio-religious system. Its corrupt nature is exposed, though her goal is not finally achieved. Yavakri's opportunism is unmasked, and so is Parvasu who uses Vishakha's allegation against his father as a mere pretext to kill him only to clear his own way to fame.

Parvasu's younger brother, Arvasu (Karnad avoids the mythological spelling Aravasu, perhaps, to emphasise the opposition between them) represents another force of

challenge. Arvasu's inherited Brahmin status, which normally positions him as an insider, is replaced by his non-Brahmin association, and he seems to hold up an outsider's opposition to the dominant order. He is an amateur theatre-actor, contrary to the tradition, and has therefore degraded his position. He becomes a Shudra not only for his passion for acting but also his love-affair with the tribal girl Nittilai. After he is accused of patricide by his brother and brutally thrown out, he becomes a vocal critic of Parvasu (or the Brahmin culture in general). He wants to "make them all pay. Yavakri, Father, Parvasu" (43), for he knows that "It's a conspiracy . . . Because I was ready to reject my caste, my birth" (43). But this is actually Arvasu's misconception that his brother is up against him for his non-Brahminic life-style. Parvasu is exclusively motivated by his selfish aspiration for spiritual fame. Arvasu's unconventionality hardly bothers him, except for the fact that he only wants to exploit this aberration to clear his own way. However, Arvasu stands as a forceful challenge to the casteist ossification since he successfully unveils its corruption like Vishakha. The epilogue, where he unsettles the sacrifice through theatre, is his final disruption of the order.

The other overt opposition comes from Nittilai whose tribal background is an established contrast to the Brahmin culture. She blatantly criticises, perhaps by virtue of her alien background, the secrecy and self-centred nature of Brahmin way of life, which totally opposes the see-through life of the tribal. The myth of spiritual power is also rejected by her on the ground of its futility to solve day to day problems (10-11). Karnad, however, avoids any simplified opposition between these two different living conditions, the Brahminic and the tribal or, so to say, non-Brahminic. A black-and-white opposition is not what the play implies. Signs of oppression can also be found even in the so-called free and wild tribal life. Aparna Dharwadker points out the presence of suppressive/corrupt factor even in the opposing narrative of the tribal. In the Brahmin order "the transgressive woman (Vishakha) is chastised but not punished, whereas among the hunters Nittilai pays with her life for choosing Arvasu over her husband" (Dharwadker, *Introduction* xix). The barbaric punitive action over the woman seriously questions the validity of the non-Brahminic critique of the Brahminic culture. Despite its oppressive politics, the Brahminic order stands noble only for this moment. The opposition between the two discursively opposite lifestyles is therefore multi-dimensional. While exposing the Brahminic politics behind the norms, Karnad has also taken care not to disregard the possibility of similar suppressive politics in the non-

Brahminic order. And this validates the play's critique of corrupt religiosity all the more. Finally, *The Fire and the Rain* can be said to have penetrated into the myth of Brahminic purity and renunciation more elaborately than *Flowers*.

Apart from the mythic Brahmin as an embodiment of piety, the present study seeks to understand the negotiation of 'Dalit' as a traditionally oppressed caste category. Like the demythologised Brahmin, the demystified Dalit also becomes a focus of the study. The emergence of the Dalit as a distinguished, separate and autonomous caste identity is the most significant thing to happen in the post-Independence discourse on caste. The political autonomy in 1947 rouses among the masses an unprecedented enthusiasm for a comprehensive change in life. Through the multiple state-initiatives such as the five-year plans, elections, decentralisation of power, spread of education (Limble 91), it is assumed that a welfare state can be created to address all forms of social injustice. But this assumption of tackling backwardness through development, which is one of the chief qualifications for the nation-building project, has since seriously been undermined (R. Kothari 1589). The constitutional promises are in place, but they are manipulated by the political parties governed by the upper-caste (traditionalist) narrative to encourage segregation of the untouchables, minimise their social and political participation and gradually ghettoise them to remain lucrative only in the vote-market. The coinage of the term 'Dalit' may have a pre-Independence origin, as it was perhaps first used by Jotibha Phule (Zelliot 271), but it gains currency only in the post-Independence period (Michael 16) as a radical reaction to the independent and post-colonial state's failure to deal with caste discrimination. In this respect, it can be said that the transfer of power from a foreign to the indigenous hand works as a further stimulus to the anger of the disadvantaged because the sense of being exploited and disillusioned in their own country, by their own people, seems to multiply the already/always consciousness of betrayal. B. R. Ambedkar's resignation from the union cabinet in 1951, his conversion to Buddhism and formation of the Republican Party of India (RPI) in 1956 owing to his frustration over the new-born state's parochial treatment of the untouchables (Zelliot 173) are indicative of this growing unrest. After RPI, the Dalit movement becomes increasingly self-assertive and militant in nature. In line with the Afro-American Black Panthers (1966), the Dalit Panthers is established in 1972. It is a "radical socio-political programme" (Wankhede 53) which tries to create a canon of revolutionary literature and culture on the basis of pride over the Dalit identity. The Dalit Panthers dies

because of its fatal dispute over ideology (Wankhede 53), but its legacy of self-pride and revolt remains undeniable in Dalit politics till date. In the allegedly secular-in-constitution-but-communal-in-culture condition of the country, the Dalits come to play a vital role in the political power-sharing. Espoused by Ambedkar as one of the ways of emancipation (Wankhede 53), capture of power seems to become an important preoccupation of the new aggressive-Dalit. They are eager to challenge the upper-caste dominance through every possible mode of participation into the system. Against the politics of caste-specific vote banks, they propose a counter participatory-politics that seeks access to power as well as education, employment and special rights; in short, they seem to launch a struggle against the system by challenging injustices from within it.

The emergence of the Dalit consciousness brings forth a situation where, on the one hand, the self-confident Dalit asks for privileges and rights, hitherto unavailable to him, in an idiom intelligible to the dominant power and, on the other, a seemingly welfare but largely power-hungry political culture goes unbound to exploit the new voice of demand. This situation seems to lead to the contemporary casteisation of politics. In this context, Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan* (1983) becomes meaningful for it proposes a critical study of the new, militant Dalit vis-à-vis the prevalent social/political culture. As the play, on the one hand, tries to understand the nuanced nature of the upper caste dominated narrative of Dalit welfare, on the other, it critically examines the stereotyped-notional realities of caste victim and its counter assertion. India's post-Independence socio-political history shows that almost all the interest-groups, be it the dominant welfare voices or the counter-active, self-assertions of the dominated, seem to be prone to a self-crisis. The crises come mostly from their ideological/theoretical/operational uncertainty, along with other peculiarities of the country's political culture. The upper caste continues to be messianic in their approach to the whole issue of caste problem. They love to act like the saviour of the lower caste and thus betray their traditionalism. Their approach seems to lead to the politicisation of the issue of caste indiscrimination. The self-interested, short-sighted politicians, largely guided by the upper caste mindset, try to reap political benefits from their caste-welfare projects. Tendulkar takes on this mindset of the dominant political narrative to show that this welfare segregates more than integrates. The Dalit counter-voice is also not free from internal problems. First, its movements are historically vulnerable to theoretical/operational crises. The Republican Party of India, being "grasped by the self-interested Mahar leadership" (Wankhede 52),

works against its ethos and fails to deliver its goal. The Dalit Panthers as well splits over the issue of Buddhist/Marxist orientation (Wankhede 53). Secondly, the Dalit movements find it very hard to remain free from the corrupt influences of the dominant political culture. To gain access to political power, supposedly for caste emancipation, they are making opportunistic alliances and letting themselves open to the “virus of endemic co-optation” (R. Kothari 1593) into a system which they ideologically oppose. A “blurred, narrow and a power-centric perspective having limited effects on social, cultural and economic status of the community” (Wankhede 53) comes into being, and it seriously undermines the traditional notion about the Dalit. In this critical moment of identity (de)formation of the Dalit, Tendulkar intervenes in to understand its character and role at the level of private relations. *Kanyadaan* is, therefore, to propose an important insight into the two most powerful narratives of contemporary caste politics – one, the upper-caste welfare enterprise, and the other, the so-called oppressed Dalit getting conscious of his right.

Nath Devlalikar, a full-time social-political activist, is highly motivated by the ideals of social justice and caste-equality. His liberal and modern attitude permeates his entire household, which represents an educated, affluent, and intellectually-sound middleclass family. A Brahmin by birth, Nath thinks it proper to set his mission to uplift the poor and the Dalits (the so-called ‘Untouchable’ in the caste idiom) and propel the creation of a caste-free society, almost from the Gandhian belief of the caste Hindu’s obligation to the untouchables (Zelliot 153). His “maniacal urge to uproot casteism” (61) comes to be greatly satisfied when his twenty-year-old daughter, Jyoti, a disciple of his ideals, proposes to marry Arun Athavale, an upcoming writer and a Dalit. Much to the discontent of the rest of the family, he rejoices over the prospect of his dream of a casteless society getting materialised through this micro-experiment of social synthesis. But cultural fissions begin to erupt as Arun proves to be an abusive husband who does not hesitate to kick at pregnant Jyoti and blackmail his Brahmin father-in-law to avenge the backwardness of his own community. Completely “trapped” (57) in Arun’s ‘self-assertion’, Nath finds himself in a situation where he can neither denounce his Dalit son-in-law at the risk of being self-denouncing nor send back his daughter to her husband to prove himself a careless father. Both he and Arun, the erstwhile-oppressor-turned-saviour and the traditionally oppressed respectively, stand exposed. Jyoti’s final act of self-resignation and return to Arun’s hostility implies the completion of this ritual of

'kanyadaan', where the girl is given away as a gift under the supervision of paternal authority to the bridegroom's custody (P. Mukherjee 54-55). If Arun's clever politics against Nath's messianic enterprise helps to critique the prevalent discourses of caste experiences, Jyoti's protest delivers the final blow to expose the irrationalities of caste and its effect on a woman.

The textual dichotomy between Nath and Arun can be read against the pre/post-Independence presence of opposing approaches to the issue of caste/casteism in this country. Among the many emancipatory ideas proposed by different thinkers and reformers, the two most prominent approaches seem to be provided by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) and Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956). The Gandhi-Ambedkar conflict is a well documented historical controversy that rocked contemporary Indian politics during the last decades of the British rule. As the historical co-presence of these two ideological perspectives signifies India's continuous attempt to address casteism and untouchability in a democratic manner (Zelliot 150), their supposedly ceaseless differences indicate the enormous complexity of the problem and the lack of a unanimous solution. Whereas Gandhi has a holistic approach to the essence of the caste system ('varnashramadharma') that explains the divinely ordained division of society for the sake of harmony, spiritual growth and traditional values, Ambedkar has lambasted it for its exploitative structure and operation and summarily rejected it. Untouchability, which Gandhi condemns as "an excrescence on Hinduism" (qtd. in Zelliot 154), should be abolished to have a reformed caste system where a scavenger's work will be as honourable as a Brahmin's, and it is the upper-caste who must come down to initiate this reformism. Ambedkar, however, believes in a "cultural revolution" (Michael 34) to annihilate the caste system itself and opposes any sort of reformism that will only help to perpetuate traditionalism. An autonomous cultural identity is imperative for this revolution. Similarly, participation in the existing system is important in order to be able to radically change the society. His legacy is evident in the later movements which continue to think about a cultural-social-political revolution to render the present situation upside-down. Nath seems to be an unintentional representation of the dominant agency (partially Gandhian/allegedly upper-caste), which owes much to his own educated, affluent and Brahmin denominations. He inherits a lot of Gandhian ideals on caste, though it will be a grossly simplistic here to club him fully with Gandhi. The influence of the liberal narratives on caste discrimination makes him conscious about the

history of upper caste atrocities and its obligatory duties to rectify the injustice perpetrated for centuries. The upper caste has to be the initiator of the mission for uplifting its oppressed brother and making him equal. This urge to rectify past mistakes by setting compensatory examples on personal level (Tendulkar, *Interview* 17) and sacrifice for the sake of the underprivileged renders the mission problematic. It smacks of a messianic approach of the powerful to the powerless and encourages inadvertently the caste stereotypes. Like Gandhi, Nath also believes that the ex-centric Dalits need a mild and tractable behaviour to be redeemed and brought back to the mainstream of life. They are the "unrefined gold" (31), or an ever-suffering cow (Gandhi qtd. in Zelliott 170), needed to be melted and moulded by a liberatory upper caste touch. They are, on their own, unable to initiate self-elevation because they are too powerless to do it and therefore deserve help from above.

The text shows ample proofs of Nath's caste-orientation. He tries to imbibe, in his own way, the liberal idealisms of the great reformers but develops an approach which is paternalistic and superficial in nature. Here is the situation where Arun is being introduced to Nath.

JYOTI. His name is Arun Athavale.

NATH. A brahmin?

JYOTI. No, he is a dalit.

NATH. Marvellous; But the name sounded like a brahmin's. (8)

When his son, Jayaprakash, wonders, "Why? What if he were a Brahmin?" (8),

NATH. I know. I know it doesn't make a difference. But if my daughter had decided to marry into high caste, it wouldn't have pleased me as much

...

JAYAPRAKASH. This is also a kind of casteism, isn't it? (8).

This casteism is superficially preoccupied with the 'Dalit' nomenclature and delivers authoritative judgment about emancipation. The marriage between a Brahmin girl and a Dalit boy can be a wonderful experiment because it will set a micro-example for macro-reformation in the country and compensate for the ancestral mistakes. Besides, it also supports the image of a political leader. Presumably, he is familiar with Gandhi's statement on inter-caste marriage, "If I had my way I would persuade all caste Hindu girls coming under my influence to select Harijan husbands" (qtd. in Zelliott 153), but his different context, limited understanding of the high principles and a hurried effort render

the entire situation critical. When the marriage is in crisis, he insists, “We must save this marriage. *Not necessarily for our Jyoti’s sake . . . This is not just a question of our daughter’s life...this has a far wide significance . . . This experiment is very precious experiment*” (my emphasis) (41). Nath’s dream for a casteless society is indeed benevolent, but the fault lies in the implementation. It ends in a catastrophe where his dream is busted and its shortcomings as a welfare discourse with upper-caste connotations are exposed. The higher caste’s obsession with the ‘Dalit’ thus comes under probe to reveal several inadequacies of its approach to the problem. Tendulkar himself comments, “what he (Nath) forgets probably is the human aspect of such experiments. During the times when he indulges in social experiment, the humans become scapegoats in the experiment” (*Interview* 17). Jyoti, who takes pride in her father’s idealism, is the scapegoat whose life is sacrificed under the paternal yoke of social reformation. The bridegroom, Arun, could be another helpless victim of this welfare, but he responds in a different way that saves him from this hidden casteism and calls for a re-reading of his stand-point as well.

To Nath’s “cultured and civilized” (52) discourse, Arun Athavale brings in a raw, unsophisticated way of aggressive self-assertion. Arun’s moment of meeting Jyoti creates a situation where two different cultures stand face to face in an inexperienced mode of mutual understanding. But the effort seems to be marred by the exigencies of Nath, eagerly pushing for a trend-setting outcome of this meeting. Now, the point of consideration is what role Arun has played in his interaction with the Devlalikar family. And what the specialities are in his counter discourse that seems to ‘baffle’ the dominant authority. Arun’s anti-Brahmin and anti-upper caste standpoint relates him inevitably to the Ambedkarite thought-process that seeks a total disavowal of the prevailing caste system instead of any allegedly conformist reformism, though he is never seen as a whole-time activist of the Dalit cause in the text and can never be regarded as belonging to the core of the Dalit intelligentsia. However, his irrevocable Dalit background empowers him with a Dalit agency to counter the upper caste. It also renders him relevant for understanding the Dalit subjectivity.

Arun’s subjectivity is predominantly governed by a deep-rooted sense of casteist betrayal and neglect. His Dalit home stands in sharp contrast to an affluent, civilized Brahmin home. He describes it thus, “From childhood I have seen my father come home

drunk everyday, and beat my mother half dead, seen her cry her heart out . . . we don't know the non-violent ways of Brahmins like you. We drink and beat our wives . . . we make love to them . . . but the beating is what gets publicized" (43-44). Tendulkar's introduction to Namdeo Dhasal's poetry, *Golpitha*, vividly recaptures the peculiarities of this world:

This is the world of days of nights; of empty or half-full stomachs; of the pain of death; of tomorrow's worries; of men's bodies in which shame and sensitivity have been burned out; . . . where leprous women are paid the price and fucked on the road, where children cry nearby. . . . (qtd. in Zelliot 277)

The awareness of this stark difference of his world renders Arun revengeful towards the upper caste society in general. Compounded by the visible rejection of Seva (Nath's wife) and Jayaprakash, his already-wounded ego holds each and every member of the Devlalikar family responsible for the injustice. Even Jyoti cannot escape his vindictive ire after marriage for being an alleged agent of the higher caste. To fulfil his revenge he develops an anti-upper caste strategy. Fully aware of his worth in the Dalit-centric political culture his father-in-law is in, he exploits his caste identity as a safe-guard against any punitive measure and continues to torment the life of his in-laws. He tortures his wife, knowing well that his father-in-law can never come out against him as nobody in the political world will buy the report that a Dalit can be a torturer and, moreover, tortures even a Brahmin! To get him trapped, he invites Nath to preside over the discussion of his autobiography, which he proclaims to be a realistic account of his downtrodden life and a sure shot for the Sahitya Akademi award. This clever stroke will either draw acclamation for brave truth-telling from a Brahmin Member of the State Legislative Council or spread out rumour that the "rise of the Dalit son-in-law to literary height caused heartburn in the upper caste, socialist father-in-law" (55). Both ways he will be credited. Although Nath knows the book to be a scrap, he can neither refuse to preside over nor slam the book down because it will endanger Jyoti's life as well as his public image. Furthermore, nor can he blatantly praise it and its author because it then proves him a liar to himself and his daughter as well. Nath, however, chooses the second way of damnation out of his (newly-but-late-emerging) fatherly concern for Jyoti and loses it all there. Here, the scheme of the 'Dalit powerless' proves so ensnaring that it makes the predominant notions of caste victim/victimiser largely debatable. Arun's cunning and duplicitous character unsettles the stereotypes about the caste victim and the possibilities of any 'pure knowledge' in this

regard. In this world of changeable realities, “yesterday’s victim is today’s victimizer” (51).

Jyoti’s character serves as an extension to Tendulkar’s reading of the caste narratives. She is the most prominent victim who suffers most at the hand of the so-called ‘liberatory’ initiatives. At her paternal home, she serves as a guinea pig in a noble experiment (69) and is encouraged to enter into the calculative barbarism of her husband. She proves to be a scapegoat not only to her father but also to her husband who uses her as a hostage to unfurl his casteist strategy. Jyoti’s misery and outburst to her father at the end becomes extremely important here because it seems to situate the caste narratives vis-à-vis their outcome on woman. Her educated and modern home provides Jyoti ample freedom to decide about her life. But this modernity and liberalism brings other kinds of constraints for the woman. Her father’s modern and liberal urge (also called, maniacal) to uproot casteism by setting a Gandhian example on private level compels her to move ahead with her choice. Her upbringing in the liberal idealism of her father makes it a filial duty for her to honour his principles and enter into the noble experiment only to find it an abyss. She explodes out at his lie about Arun’s book as it nakedly proves the superficiality of the beliefs she has admired for so long. Her heart-break strips the self-deceiving lie, i.e. Nath himself. Tendulkar brings Jyoti to brutally pull the curtain off Nath alone because Arun is already self-exposed. Her return to Arun’s strategic hostility is ironical since it is a cynical self-resignation of a woman who, through her disdainful rejection, exposes the irrelevances of all these powerful discourses.

The importance of *Kanyadaan* probably lies in its bold handling of the post-Independence degradation of the anti-caste(ism) discourses into petty caste politics. Gandhi’s holistic view of the caste system sans untouchability and Ambedkar’s demand for social and political rights of the Dalits, however inter-opposing they might be, had one thing in common; they both helped to keep the Dalits’ urge for self-development alive, though their definitions of this development differed from each other. Apart from the Panthers movement and sporadic efforts of some committed social workers, India’s caste movements come to be arguably imprisoned in an endless politics of reservation and quota system. Advantages are seized by a selective few at the cost of proper development of the needy Dalits. In the context of this degeneration of political culture, anti-caste(ism) forces seem to have become either superficial imitation of the welfare ideals (e.g. Nath)

or crudely opportunistic, self-serving strategies for instant and short-cut success (such as Arun). None of them display the desire or ability to penetrate into the core of the issue. On the contrary, they look upon the 'Dalit' as a circumscribed category lucrative enough to serve their own profits. The upper caste Nath Devlalikar uses it to strengthen his social image, whereas the Dalit boy Arun maximises his caste background for personal profit. *Kanyadaan* proposes to critique these tendencies and expose the dangers involved in the political obsession with caste and the intolerant, opportunistic caste-radicalism turning wild. At this point, the play stands relevant to contemporary caste-dialogues.

Girish Karnad's take on the issue of caste(ism) in *Tale'-Danda* seems to be in tune with Tendulkar's. They both seem to realise the difficulty of arriving at a polemical stand for caste emancipation. Although the 'logic of inequality' of caste hierarchy proves to be provocative enough to draw numerous protests in history, the varied complexity of the problem always eludes a unanimous mode of emancipation. Both Tendulkar's and Karnad's negotiation of caste is therefore, at one level, an acknowledgement of its undeniable presence in contemporary Indian society and, at another, a probe into its complex mechanism, instead of giving easy solution to the problem. *Tale'-Danda* is such an attempt that tries to initiate a dialogue with caste(ism) through a historical relocation of the issue in the twelfth-century Karnataka, with connotative reference to the present crisis and absence of a solution. The re-interpretation of history, which is a favourite tool of Karnad, allows the required space and scope to investigate the issue through the advantages of remoteness and hindsight and also the freedom from the constraints of immediate reality. From such vantage point, the perils of casteism are scrutinised to examine why and how the counter discourses fail to arrive at a position, where they should have been, for a comprehensive liberation from casteist oppression.

Tale'-Danda, which was written in 1989 in Kannada and translated into English in 1993, literally means death by beheading. The play enacts the tumultuous decades between AD 1148 and AD 1168 when the city of Kalyan in Karnataka witnessed the rise of Basavanna and his Bhakti movement, known as the Virasaiva movement. The spiritual-cum-social movement aspired to usher in a life of equal right and opportunity for all by radically problematising the traditional 'Sanatan' dharma and its oppressive structure. Under the sagacious leadership of Basavanna, they espoused anti-caste, anti-Sanskrit, anti-war principles to reform the rotten society, where equality of sexes and

castes, hard and dedicated work would be valued more than the artificial rituals of Brahminism. They surrendered themselves to their sole God, Lord Shiva and called themselves the 'sharanas' who shed all that divide and deprive for a casteless and classless society. It was, as Karnad puts it in his Preface, "an age unmatched in the history of Karnataka for its creativity, courageous questioning and social commitment" (i). Their opposition to the Brahminic system of caste hierarchy, however, invited the wrath of the orthodox. The Brahmins, along with other interest groups, conspired to destroy the movement, and the people of Kalyan missed the chance to witness a revolution, both religious and social in nature.

The twelfth-century Kalyan has always been the focus of literary and intellectual attentions that have tried to understand Basavanna and the historical moment of spiritual and social awakening (Krishnamurthy qtd. in T. Mukherjee 232). Karnad's attempt to revisit this moment of history is therefore not unprecedented. Among the many sources, Karnad is substantially indebted to A. K. Ramanujan, who translated the free verse lyrics of Vasavanna used in this play. "M. Chidanda Murthy's *Basavanna* in National Biography Series published by National Book Trust and H. Thipperudra Swamy's *Basaveshwara* in the Makers of Indian Literature Series published by Sahitya Akademi" (Nayak 94) are some of the other sources that he has exploited.

The play begins during the reign of King Bijjala when Basavanna's movement is at its height. The city of Kalyan is highly divided on casteist line where each of the streets is named after the caste of its inhabitants. In the first act of the play, Karnad has presented a detailed picture of the situation to capture the moment of dormant tension awaiting an outburst. The state has an able administrator in the figure of King Bijjala who knows how to run a government and is evidently a sympathiser of the sharana movement, he himself being a barber by birth. But unfortunately he is surrounded by a pack of incompetent and hungry wolves, the powerful Brahmins of the royal court and his own son Sovideva who claims to represent the Kshatriyas. The alarming rise of the sharana cult sees these people preparing for a power game. In the beginning, Karnad however concentrates mainly on the growing popularity of the movement and also how the fast growth is bringing upon substantial deviations from Basavanna's humanist principles, endangering the prospect of the entire mission. He sometimes uses King Bijjala as a sane and able ruler to point out

where the sharana movement is treading dangerously and on other occasions lets the movement itself roll on to self-discover the rifts within.

Notwithstanding Basavanna's revolutionary effort, the sharana movement seems to be entrapped within its own discourse of Bhakti. In its attempt to root out a social disease, it itself becomes vulnerable to many of the ingredients of that disease and appropriates some of the styles of the dominant discourses that seriously undermines its ideological distinction. The first instance of intervention in such appropriation occurs when Prince Sovideva makes a sudden visit to the treasury and tries to accuse the royal treasurer Basavanna of "systematically defrauding the Treasury" (8). This act of conspiracy to malign Basavanna results in a vehement protest of the sharanas who sit around and besiege the treasury for eleven days till Basavanna comes and gets inside with the prince to check the accounts. It proves to be total fiasco for Sovideva as Basavanna comes out clean, disproving all allegations of fraudulence. This incident, which undoubtedly asserts Basavanna's glory, is however used by the playwright to denote the dangers involved in such vigorous outburst of support and solidarity on the part of the disciples. Fifteen thousand sharanas, incensed at the insolence of the prince against their beloved leader, flock to the place of incident within an hour and sit there till the leader comes to handle the matter. No wonder they could have been more aggressive with a little more provocation, and the situation could deteriorate. Such boundless enthusiasm is always risky as it tends to overstep in its struggle against an age-old, powerful and complex system. Basavanna's impeccable character was sure enough to come out clean from the conspiracy, and so does it. But the devotional frenzy of his followers misreads the event and interprets it as an act of miracle. They indeed believe that Basavanna has stolen the money for good cause but Lord Shiva has refunded the whole amount (22). Basavanna is thunderstruck at this display of spiritual hysteria, which indirectly proves him to be a thief! The administrative eye of King Bijjala can see through it and cautions Basavanna about this "mass hunger for divine grace" (23) and the "delirium of bhakti" (24) which can derail his movement and club him together with the forces he opposes. But it seems to be too late for anybody to control the course of events and, 'bhakti' continues to get the upper hand over logic and reason.

The text reveals another crisis within the movement when it comes to the issue of religious conversions. The sharanas reportedly wage a war against the caste system in

order to liberate millions of people from this '(il)logic of inequality'. They preach the principles of liberty, equality and creativity and uphold the vision of a new world so much so that the barber-by-birth king comes to be elated by this humanist and non-casteist approach to mankind. But much to the dismay of their leader, they indulge in violence against and forced conversion of other communities like the Jains and the tribals. The reports of the sharanas occupying the Jain temple by force and turning it into a Shiva temple and their jeer at the primitive disposition of the tribal gods disturb Basavanna to the core. He tries to assert his values, though without effect, over his frenzied followers, "Violence is wrong, whatever the provocation. To resort to it because someone else started it first is even worse. And to do so in the name of a structure of brick and mortar is a moment of stupidity" (29).

Basavanna's wisdom inevitably draws contextual reference to the turbulent period of the late 1980s and early 90s that saw the religious and political frenzy over the Ram Janmabhumi movement, leading to the demolition of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya. However, it would be wrong to read this wisdom against a specific historical context. The distorted exercises of the sharanas, which go against the principles of the Virasaiva movement as espoused by Basavanna, raise questions not only to a specific moment of history but also initiate a critical dialogue with the contemporary history of social movements, chiefly the anti-caste activisms. The neo-aggressiveness of the caste-backwards, augmented largely by the Mandal Commission recommendations (submitted in 1980, implemented in 1989) and represented through newer social/political formations, provide a valid context to the debates raised by the play. The use of the spectacles of religious conversions as caste emancipation has always been a way of self-assertion and protest for the Dalits since Ambedkar's historic conversion on 14 October 1956. However, it can be regarded as a highly debatable issue as to whether the recent buzz over the Buddhist conversions of the Dalits (Huggler; *Mass Dalit*) has a positive impact on the life of the downtrodden or not. The strategic interests behind these conversions seem to be crucial in determining their effectiveness as emancipatory mode. Self-serving and politically motivated attitudes often render such exercises mere showbiz, much in opposition to the spirit embodied in Ambedkar's valiant step. The sharanas' obsession with conversion of other communities suggests a deviation from their true objectives and an unwholesome reliance over short-cut and superficial means. This trend greatly disturbs Basavanna and also holds the current caste discourses, especially the moments of caste-

related conversions, in a mode of critical understanding. The over-enthusiasm of Bhakti, which knows no rational bound, proves counter-productive and destroys the movement from within. Under this critical observation, the present-day issues such as caste violence, militant activism, the alleged dilution of the challenger's expected position of difference (as it happened with Arun Athavale in *Kanyadaan*) come to reveal new implications.

The play intervenes in caste rationalisation most crucially in Act Two, where the sharanas and the rest, chiefly the Brahmins, are poised for a final show-down, contrary to the expectations of Basavanna and King Bijjala. Karnad's presentation of the Brahmin power is in tune with one of history's most evident fact about the oppressive caste-privileged. From their self-given status of dominant agency, the Brahmins had acquired the ultimate power to define religion and social system. To maintain the hierarchy of power and keep their agency crucial in the overall system, they often forged alliance with subordinate castes like the Kshatriyas, who were traditionally bestowed with the duty of administration, to create a mutually shared platform of power. The chief objective behind such alliance remained to liquidate the untouchable agency and any form of 'aberration'. Basavanna's revolutionary spiritualism, which ultimately tends to subvert the Brahminic status quo, draws its inevitable enemies. The Brahmins of the royal court take the initiative to consolidate others against this new threat. The sharana concept of caste-equality sounds abominable to them for its renunciation of rigid rituals and norms of religion. The idea that simple Bhakti can bring down gods to their devotees without any ritual is absurd as well as dreadful because it jeopardizes their hold over gods and scriptures. They extol the divinely ordained "logic of inequality" (56), which teaches "One's caste is like one's home" (56), as an unalterable solution to the social anarchy. But their well-thought 'logic' proves too weak to resist Basavanna's simple and honest 'illogic', and at the fear of being sidelined and rendered useless, they prepare to hit back hard.

The tension between the sharanas and the Brahmins finally erupts over the incident of a marriage between a Brahmin's daughter and a cobbler's son. As in *Kanyadaan*, inter-caste marriage here also appears to be a highly troubled/troubling issue: Karnad deliberately places this incident at the centre of the conflict in order to use it as a prismatic tool to critique the sharana movement. All through his life, Basavanna has espoused the policy of free inter-caste traffic in the forms of sitting together, dining,

praying and, if possible, marrying with a view to promoting solidarity and brotherhood among people. But his dream of social equality through inter-caste marriage, which seems to be Gandhian (Zelliot 153) in spirit, receives its major setback when his followers propose such a marriage to show the world that they preach their principles not only in theory but also in practice. The mere idea of it horrifies Basavanna as he is well aware of the probable repercussions, but he has to relent to the pressure of his followers. Hell breaks upon the city of Kalyan. The Brahmins find a useful Kshatriya ally in the stupid but ambitious prince Sovideva who wants to be the king. But Karnad thrusts on the happenings in the sharana quarter, which stands wide open and irrational to this critical probe.

The marriage episode exposes the rift between Basavanna and his followers that has already reached an incurable stage. The power of Bhakti reportedly fails to divest the sharanas of their individual egotism. Personal rivalry and jealousy make inroads into the movement, as Jagadeva, an important sharana, tries to outshine Basavanna's popularity as a 'miracle man'. He uses the proposed marriage as a tool to capture the centre-stage. The marriage of the two souls hailing from two different cultural worlds, which could have been a beautiful example of caste harmony on personal level, is politicised and spoiled. The sharana urgency over it reminds one of Nath Devlalikar's exigency over his Brahmin daughter's marriage with a Dalit boy in *Kanyadaan*. Both the playwrights seem to critique such tendency of anti-casteism that ignores personal wishes of the people concerned and objectifies them through the strategically-motivated imposition of harmony. In opposition to Basavanna's caution against hasty multiculturalism, Madhuvarsa, the bride's father, declares, "I shall not hesitate to sacrifice my daughter's life to forward the cause of our great movement" (39) and literally pushes her, like Jyoti Devlalikar, to a disaster. The growing disputes within the community reveal several other irrationalities, which were kept hidden by the "delirium of bhakti" (24) and the common anathema to the Braminic excesses. They all now begin to show that emotional frenzy has gained more power than logic in the movement, and this now proves self-defeating. Besides, the concept of total self-renunciation for the larger cause remains still far away from the majority of the sharanas. Their failure to grasp Basavanna's idealism leaves them as a group fragile enough to face any serious threat from within or outside. When the spiritual zeal vanishes, they remain to appear as a large horde of murderers, which is no better than their adversaries.

Apart from his insight into the sharana polemics of anti-casteism, Karnad has given a serious thought over the post-marriage bloodshed. This violence is largely the handicraft of the opposing Brahmin-Kshatriya alliance, thriving on the inner confusions of the reformation movement. The critical engagement unveils a crude game of power as the worst consequence of a potential revolution. Both the king and Basavanna are dumped by all for their people-friendly stand. Jagadeva and his goons unnecessarily murder the powerless king to avenge the killing of the inter-caste couple (85). The Brahmins exploit Sovideva's greed for the throne in order to destroy the sharanas. In the turmoil when the whole of Kalyan burns, Sovideva, the psychotic-whimsical prince, captures all power and emerges as the cruel dictator of a military state that upholds all the norms and customs Basavanna fought against. The ending of the play shows the dreadful consequences of hasty and irrational actions coupled with vested designs over sensitive social issues. The inadequacies of the movement are revealed. They lead to a situation of chaos and let it roll in favour of the dominant power to exploit the situation and reassert its authority. The radical dream of social equality comes to provide the upholder of caste hierarchy an opportunity to regain their strength and continue oppression in a way worse than before.

Under Tendulkar's and Karnad's critical gaze, the contemporary realities of caste stand strikingly unveiled. The present chapter brings forth some of these realities as negotiated by the plays. Caste(ism) can be said to survive through the politics of maintaining the stereotypes and rationalising the irrationals. The plays boldly examine this political process and foreground realities to challenge several notional facts about caste. The Brahminic idea of purity is one such fact that is ruthlessly contested. Several types of Brahmin characters, such as the inquisitive and iconoclast Brahmin, the other who is a passionate lover, and even the schematic one, appear to deglamourise the mythic Brahmin and challenge his concept of piety and purity. This contestation is immensely important not only to locate the Brahmins in the contemporary caste context but also to understand the position of almost the entire upper caste. The purity culture seems to be a contagious condition that affects the Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas as well and helps construct a superiority consciousness across the entire upper and lower caste domain. These non-Brahmin-touchable castes, mostly categorised as Other Backward Classes in the state lexicon, are reportedly no less influential than the Brahmins in continuing untouchability in the present society (Cybil 82). Since the rural elite is now largely

constituted by the OBCs, the untouchables or the Dalits in villages seem to suffer most at their hand, instead of the Brahmins (Soumitro Das 16). From this point, the contestation of the Brahminic piety seems to critique the caste prejudices and stereotypes still prevalent in the upper and lower segments of the hierarchy.

Apart from the culture of piety, the post-Independence characteristics of Dalit assertions, the upper caste dominated welfare enterprises and the volatile situation of contemporary caste politics are also negotiated. What emerges from this negotiation is not the possibility of a utopian world free from discrimination. There seems to be no ready-made way-out from the complications of casteism. Both the playwrights have explored the present condition of disparity and distrust and scrutinised the subtle aspects of caste experiences often kept unacknowledged. The hidden versions of reality are brought to the fore to provoke fresh insight into the widely familiar and taken-for-granted situations. The knowledge does not provide easy solution to be sure but helps understand how caste(ism) functions in today's society. It presents a world stagnated by murky caste politics, where a perfect harmony between Devadatta, the fair and feeble Brahmin and Kapila, the dark and rugged low-caste (*Hayavadana*) still looks inconceivable. The investigation into the various nuances of this world may prove helpful towards a sociable and productive co-existence of these opposing sections. Tendulkar's and Karnad's study of caste reality largely remains an attempt at this end – that is, to formulate a fresh methodology of cognition and arrive at an understanding of the situation, free from dogmas and stereotypes.