

## Chapter III

### INTERROGATING SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN MODERN INDIA

Weber, in his study 'The Methodology of the Social Sciences' states that

“Every science of psychological and social phenomena is a science of human conduct (which includes all thought and attitudes). These sciences seek to ‘understand’ this conduct and by means of this understanding to ‘explain’ it ‘interpretatively’ .... All we are interested in here is one particular type namely ‘rational’ interpretation.” (Weber 1949: 40)

Customs, norms, values, beliefs of any society are the cultural bases of human action. Along with these human action is also shaped by other factors like peer pressure and situational demands. Rational interpretation cannot always become successful because of such circumstantial barriers. It is hardly unexpected on the part of a society not to have problems. Human beings have faced problems since their very appearance on this planet. Primitive people had to reckon with the forces of nature, to learn their secrets, to make necessary adjustment with them for their survival. In course of time, they became able to harness them to some extent to make life comfortable. Even now, nobody can

ignore nature. Human beings had to live in groups, organize into society to confront the challenge of nature. Social life laid the foundation of civilization which improved the quality of life turning the primitive food gatherers into food producers. However, it developed certain complications and tensions in human relations too which are discernible in every society as they manifest themselves in numerous social problems.

So the strength of a society is judged not by the absence of social problems but by the nature of response to them observed in it, which can be positive or negative. If it improves, strengthens and leads to the well-being of the society, the response is positive. But if that weakens the society by causing ill – will, discord and disorder, we cannot but call that negative. Bearing that in mind, we proceed to probe the problems we come across in Shashi Deshpande’s novels and the response to the same found in the novels.

We find cases of murder in two novels of Shashi Deshpande. In *If I Die Today* (1982) murders take place in a medical college hospital (S. D. College and Hospital) under mysterious circumstances. First, Guru, a cousin of Dr. Ashok, a cancer patient under treatment dies followed by Suman’s wife. Then, Tony’s dead body is found floating in the tank near the temple. Suspicion in each case fell on people who had nothing to do with the crime. It is only after the murderous attack on Vijay in the dark of night that the true identity of the murderer comes to light. The criminal is none other than Dr. Vidya Agrawal, the sister of the Dean.

In *Come Up and Be Dead* (1983), six attempts at murder are made, three of which succeed. Sonali, Sharmila and Davayani are the victims who survive while Pratap Rao, Mrs. Jyoti Raman and Mridula do not. Mridula commits suicide but Pratap and Jyoti are killed by Sanjay who is involved as the doer or accomplice in all the cases. But the last few pages of the novel reveal that Dr. Girish and Mr. Verma are the real villains in the piece.

Dr. Vidya Agrawal, the murderer in *If I Die Today* is mentally deranged. Her excluded life and brother fixation have led her to that sad plight. She behaves unlike others in her profession because she is no better than the insane animal of the night. The murders committed by her are senseless, not a product of cold calculation. The murders in *Come Up and Be Dead* are, on the contrary, deliberate and planned. Sanjay kills Pratap and Mrs. Raman because they knew about his call girl racket and attempts to kill Sonali as he suspects she has told her mother something about it. He tries to kill her cousin Sharmila who is also her mistress as she hinders him from killing Sonali. Dr. Girish becomes involved in the call girl trade because he is ever in need of ample money for his demanding, smart and spendthrift wife. He masterminds all the attempts to murder to hide his role in the racket. The sorrowful widower Mr. Verma runs the call girl racket at Hotel Open Sesame for entirely different reason. Deserted by his wife, he feels humiliated and carries a canker of hatred for young women within him. In a strange revengefulness, he treats innocent girls into the morass of immorality. He maintains his show of respectability by silencing people by

bribing them or getting them killed. Francis Bacon's observation that vindictive persons live the life of witches, who, as they are mischievous, so end they unfortunate, holds good in his case. Miss Havisham in Charles Dicken's *Great Expectations* resembles him to some extent. As Compeyson had disappointed her by not turning up to marry her on the appointed day, she makes Estella disappoint Pip in like manner. However, Verma has surpassed Miss Havisham in diabolic activity.

If the misdeeds described in the two novels seem incredible, creations of wild imagination far removed from reality, we can recall several cases before 1982 to dispel doubts. Rama Raghav had terrorised street— dwellers of Mumbai in 1968, killing people indiscriminately by night as they slept in open air. Judged to be suffering from incurable schizophrenia, he was sentenced to life imprisonment. Charles Shobhraj, an urbane and cultivated man, murdered tourists in South Asia in 1970s. An auto – rickshaw driver Shankar murdered nine teenage girls in Chennai over six months in 1988 and claimed to have done that under the spell of cinema. He was executed in 1995. Towards the end of 2006, Moninder Singh Pandher of Nithari settlement in Noida became notorious after more than 38 people were reported to have disappeared. By the middle of January 2007, the remains of about 17 poor, young women and juveniles were found in the drain near his house.

The position of the criminal and the vulnerability of citizens as depicted in the two novels raise questions about dealing with such criminals and

saving the lives of their unaware targets. Neither pathology nor psychiatry has any means till date to detect and mark out psychopaths. Society is even more helpless with doctors like Vidya Agrawal. A doctor in the United States of America was detected after killing 34 patients under his care while the other after killing 54. Another in Australia became known as Dr. Death after eliminating 84. Such formidable persons can be punished when detected but nothing can be done before that. Public opinion differs and varies according to circumstances. Sri Lanka decided to revive death penalty after the murder of Solomon Bandarnaike. People in India supported the execution of the rapist Dhananjay Chatterjee vehemently and are likely to welcome a similar punishment in case of sadists like Moninder Singh. Shashi Deshpande sticks to the view that law should take its course and the wicked must be punished. That is what happens to the wrongdoers in both the novels.

*If I Die Today* reveals the helplessness of the patients when the doctor is a psychopath. But even then, detention and prevention would become easy if human life was deemed sacred and not a single death was dismissed lightly.

*Come Up and Be Dead* shows the human weaknesses that contribute to the disaster to a large extent. Lasciviousness, fear, greed and lavishness seem to be the main factors responsible for the tragedy. Sharmila and Mridula fall in the trap laid by Sanjay because of lasciviousness. Then, there are other girls who spend lavishly to maintain a high standard of living in order to appear 'modern'. Being ever in need of money, they fall in the trap of criminals easily. So, young

women can save their lives by overcoming such weaknesses to a large extent.

That seems to be Shashi Deshpande's view as suggested in the two novels.

Murder is a crime punished by law in every civilised society. It is committed due to a number of reasons. Some of the reasons are disclosed in the novels discussed above. Psychopaths like Vidya Agrawal need no motive for murders. Mr. Verma and Dr. Girish have a hatred for woman that makes them masterminds of murders. Both of them share the same fear of detection with Sanjay which precipitates attempts to murder. Besides the reasons found in the novels, there are other reasons too; as seen every now and then; greed, religious frenzy, political hostility, and sheer rage are the common ones. Superstition is the cause of murders in some cases. Human sacrifice to please some deity or evil spirit, burning widows, lynching the so – called witches is the cases to the point. Though banned by law, such practices are not totally unheard of.

Generally people denounce a murderer and wish to see him punished. That is particularly true, if the crime is committed to rob money, to hide attempted rape, or the victim is a tender – age one. If the murder is unintentional and unplanned, law does not treat it harshly. Capital punishment, that is, death by hanging, beheading, electric chair or lethal injection has been the officially approved method of punishing murderers. The form varies in different countries and in various ages. The more severe the punishment, the happier the people felt in the past. That attitude led to the invention of several crude methods of killing the offender, for example, throwing him to the dogs, getting him crushed under

the feet of an elephant, burning him alive, etc. Capital punishment was carried out in the open before cheering spectators during the medieval age. But the progress of civilisation has changed the taste and temperament of people. A humane treatment of even criminal is now demanded. People are no longer eager to watch and applaud and therefore, executions are now carried out in the presence of few witnesses absolutely required by law. Moreover, organisations like Amnesty International are agitating for total repeal of capital punishment. Several countries in the world have abolished capital punishment in response to such demands. There are arguments for and against the abolition and it is not possible to discuss them here. Suffice it to say that there is a strong case for the demand in countries where most of the recipients of death penalty are the ethnic or religious minority (e.g., the blacks in the U.S.A., the Basques in Spain, the Kurds and the Jews in Arab countries etc.)

*The Binding Vine (1998)* brings to the limelight the problem of rape. Kalpana is the victim in the novel. The rapist in the case is her maternal aunt's husband, Prabhakar. The man had set his eyes on Kalpana. Though her mother and maternal aunt acquiesced, Kalpana spurned his advances. Then Prabhakar, a man about her father's age raped her. Her mother, Shakuntala (Shaku tai) became a willing partner in the design to pass the case as a car accident. Her motive for the strange behavior is revealed in the following words:

“If a girl's honor is lost, what is left ? The girl doesn't have to do anything wrong..... people will themselves point a finger at

her..... Even if it is true, keep it to yourself, don't let anyone know of it. I have another daughter what will become of her?" (BV 59)

That is, society blames the victim instead of the rapist for the crime. Prospects of marriage of girls and boys in the family are jeopardized for no fault of theirs. The police, entrusted with the task of enforcing laws, go to a great length to help the rapists. The following extract lays bare their attitude succinctly:

"The police officer argued with him (Dr. Bhaskar) why make it a case of rape? he asked. She's going to die anyway, so what difference does it make.....? We don't like rape cases, the man said. They are messy and troublesome, never straightforward. But forget that and think of the girl and her family. Do you think it'll do them any good to have it known that the girl was raped?" (BV 88)

If that logic seems to have concern for the victim and her family, the deceitful appearance is belied by the following addition:

"For all you know she may be a professional, we see a lot of that. But if you ask me.....She must have been out with a boy friend — girls of that class always have boy friends the families know nothing about it. May be after they had a bit of fun she was knocked down by a car." (BV 88)

The words “that class” are quite significant here as they expose the class bias of the police officer. As the doctor refers to the marks of fingers on Kalpana’s arms, huge contusions on her thighs and marks of teeth on her lips, he gives in but adds:

“Okay.....She was raped. But publicising it isn’t going to do any one any good. It’s going to mean trouble for everyone— the girl, her family, you colleague who first examined her, us.” (BV 88-89)

Thus, the police are neither sympathetic nor helpful to the rape victims of the working class. It is sad that the victim’s family become unwittingly their tool.

Events take a sudden turn when the hospital authorities decide to transfer Kalpana to some suburban hospital as she does not recover her consciousness even after four months. The ground for the decision is the paucity of beds in the hospital. Urmi persuades Shaku tai to publicise the case and gets it done with the help of her journalist friend Malcom. The television coverage follows the press reports soon. That arouses hot discussions in the media which is not entirely sympathetic. A section of men sticks to the opinion that rape happens because women go about exposing themselves — a opinion also shared by the misinformed, backward section of women like Shaku tai. To that Radha, the fiance of Urmi’s brother Amrut, retorts: “I think men’s minds are like public lavatories— full of dirty pictures.” (BV 182) However, publicity wins support

and sympathy. Women mobilise to protest against the atrocity, there are questions and uproar in the assembly and the decision to transfer is withdrawn.

As soon as the case is reopened, it comes to light that the rapist is no other than Prabhakar the husband of Kalpana's mother's sister, Sulu. The discovery shocks Sulu rudely and she immolates herself. The story highlights two things. First, the rapist need not be a stranger all the time. He may be even a relation and in that case young women are extremely vulnerable. In *Roots and Shadows* (1992) Indu at 15 had felt Vasant Kaka's 'helping hands' giving her 'the age—old messages of male to female' and panicked. (RS 136)

She was lucky enough to save herself. Secondly, it shows that hiding the truth does not help the victim and her family, but the victimizer. Marital rape, but the other form of rape, received Shashi Deshpande's concern in her short story, 'The Intrusion'. It recorded the horror of a newly married woman whose crass and insensitive husband violated her body exercising his conjugal rights. The theme acquires greater dimensions in three of her novels.

There are two cases of marital rape in *The Binding Vine*. The less noticed one is that of Shaku tai. Her marriage was the greatest misfortune of her life. Almost a year after her marriage, she discovered that her husband neither had a permanent job, nor did he care for that. He shared a room in the police chowk with his cousin, a policeman in Bombay. Here he joined them as a free servant. She had to sleep with her husband in the common passage outside their

room. It was there she conceived and her daughter Kalpana was born. The circumstances are best narrated by her in conversation with Urmi:

“I, a woman, had to sleep there, in public with strange men walking up and down. But my husband’ — the voice dropped low’ ‘you know what men are, he wanted to..... We’re not animals I told him. As if he cared. And I got pregnant”. (BV 110 – 111)

Besides the considerations of absence of privacy and decency, there was a material ground for unwillingness on her part. Her husband held temporary jobs now and then and liked idling for months after that. So she wanted to earn some money and had just started working at a grocer’s shop. The unwanted pregnancy jeopardized her design and made life even more miserable for her. She had to endure the outrage as nobody but Urmi would lend a sympathetic ear to her.

The more noticed and better discussed in the same novel is the marital rape of Mira that gave birth to Kishor. Mira was a talented girl at college who wrote poems in Kannada and expressed herself in English too. She had to give up her studies as a stranger became obsessed of her, contacted her parents through a common friend and married her at 18. She died at 22 giving birth to her son Kishor. Her diaries in English and poems in Kannada survived to tell how painful married life was to her.

*Roots and Shadows* tells another tale of marital rape:

Akka “was just twelve when she got married. And he was well past thirty....He was at all bulky man with large coarse features. And she...was small and dainty, really pretty, with her round face, fair skin, straight nose and curly hair. Six months after her marriage, she “grew up” and went to her husband’s home. What she had to endure there, nobody knows. She never told anyone.....But I heard that twice she tried to run away.....a girl of thirteen. Her mother – in – law I heard, whipped her for that and locked her up for three days. Starved her as well. And then, sent her back to her husband’s room. The child, they said, cried and clung to her mother – in – law saying, “Lock me up again, lock me up.” But there was no escape.....”. Such experiences have left a lasting impression on Akka. That is why she tells the recounter of the tale to Atya before the consummation of her marriage: ‘Now your punishment begins, Narmada, you have to pay up for all those saris and jewels’. (RS 69 – 70)

Manohar and Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1990) had married inter caste for love. Theirs was not an arranged marriage. Sarita had gone to the extent of severing her ties with parents for the sake of love. All was going well until a girl came home to interview Sarita for a magazine and asked Manohar

unwittingly, “How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well.” (DHNT 200)

That hurt the ego of Manohar who is a lecturer in a third rate college while his wife is a renowned doctor. Manohar gives vent to his feelings that night by attacking Sarita like a wild animal. On another occasion, he feels insulted when a colleague says that he cannot afford an expensive vacation and his wife adds that he could have done that had he married a doctor. Sadistic attacks are repeated thereafter but Sarita dare not do anything to stop them. It is toward the end of the novel that she gathers courage and determination to do that.

Rape is a widespread phenomenon. One woman in five in the world is likely to be a victim of rape or attempted rape in her life. According to WHO figures, United Kingdom recorded 1200 cases of rape in 2001 and the British Crime Survey in 2001 estimated that just 15 per cent of the cases came to the attention of police. Regarding the attitude of the enlightened people of that country toward rape victims ‘The Independent’ reported that one in three people in Britain believe a woman is partially or completely to blame for being raped if she has behaved in a flirtatious manner or is drunk, according to the research. More than a quarter also believe a woman is at least partially responsible for being raped if she wears sexy or revealing clothing, a survey of 1095 British adults found. With such attitude of the public, the performance of the courts was predictable. Only one in 19 was likely to be convicted. The Economist

observed that at the moment, victim's prospects are poor. Frequently disbelieved, disregarded and humiliated in court, they often fear they have been assaulted twice.

In Developing Countries like India, the condition can be no better. A rape occurs in India every 40 minutes. Rape figures during the period 1987—1991 rose from 7767 to 9738, an increase of 26.1%. (Kudchedkar, Sirin. and Al-Issa, Sabiha 90)

On an average 37 rapes are committed everyday. In 95% of the cases, the accused are acquitted for one reason or other. The lot of the poor is the worst. About one hundred cases of rape were reported every year in the 1980s in which the victims belonged to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes while the victimizers were mostly security forces. In the village Tirundli in Kerala three hundred unmarried girls, raped by non – tribals, had become mothers.

Rape is not only a delinquent, unorganised individual violence against female it is often an instrument of oppression and domination against the poor, the dominated class and people. Rapes committed by Pakistan army in Bangladesh in 1971 were designed as a punishment for the aspiration of freedom. The Japanese had committed similar atrocities during the World War II in the countries overrun by them. The 'Jehadis' in Jammu and Kashmir are repeating the same since 1989. Even during peace, rape is practised to maintain domination and quell protest. Gang rape of twenty women in Pararia village in Bihar in 1988 shown in the documentary film "Rape as Assertion of Power"

directed by Saagari Chhabra is an instance to the point. As the village was the first to be submerged under water due to a major dam project the villagers were demanding adequate compensation for their land. The gang rape was organised to suppress the agitation.

Society, administration and judiciary are hardly helpful to the victims. Society blames the victim, not the victimiser. The police and administration side with the rich, the powerful and people with political identity. Several cases of rape, committed by relations were reported during the last decade. Criminals in almost all of them remain unpunished. People in West Bengal still remember the dignitary who called the victims of rape in Birati an immoral lot. No wonder then that the women of lower classes are believed to be devoid of character by people who matter and charges of molestation and rape brought in by them are dismissed lightly. Often, they are alleged to be lying to extort some money and the excuse suffices to set at liberty the rich and powerful rapists.

A law promulgated in September, 1989 sought to protect the vulnerable section but rape by the police and para – military forces remains wide spread particularly in Manipur. More than twelve years have passed since Justice A. S. Anand and Justice Sagir Ahmad observed the following but reality remains unchanged till date:

“A rapist not only violates the privacy and personal integrity, but mentally causes serious psychological as well as physical harm in the process.” (Punjab vs. Gurmeet Singh, 1996)

In the same case, Supreme Court further asked the trial court to bear in mind that their observations have wider impact on society. It held that even if the victim had a permissive life, no reference to the victim as being a girl of loose moral character was permissible. It added that even promiscuous women had the right to refuse to submit herself to anyone.

Marital rape, the other kind of rape, is less reported as it is held to be the private matter of the married couple. Both religion and tradition permit the husband the license and total control over the person, his wife. Many people deem it inappropriate to call it 'rape' for the same reason. Sociologists nowadays, however, admit its reality. Marital rape has been common in India since long as it was decided at a certain point of time that girls ought to be married to people much older before they attained puberty. Even when the age – gap is not wide, the consent of wife matters for the sake of harmonious relationship.

A well – known case of marital rape described by the victim herself is found in Abida Suttaan's *Memoir of A Rebel Princess*. Born in the royal house of Bhopal she was the mother of the Pakistan Diplomat, Shaharyar Khan and aunt to cricketer M. A. K. Pataudi. Though she had to memorise the Koran in childhood, she grew up sports – mad in a rebelliously masculine mould, played polo and hockey and became an aviator and All-India Women's Squash champion. Her horror began with her marriage to the Nawab of Kuwait. As she had put it that she entered the world to conjugal trauma.....her revulsion for

married sex produced an equally frustrating and damning reaction from her husband. That brief union led to the birth of Shaharyar. She briskly settled the matter of the child custody by driving late one night to her husband's estate, whipping out a revolver and threatening to shoot him or herself. The Nawab sensibly remarried and the two remained great friends. Abida died in Karachi in April 2002.

Ayesha Khatun, the daughter of a tailor was not that fortunate. Married on 25<sup>th</sup> April, 2004 her married life lasted not more than a day. Her husband Mohammad Afros gave her milk laced with sedatives on the wedding night and physically abused her. She bore several injuries and had to be operated upon twice to stop profuse bleeding. Her husband turned down her pleas to take her to a doctor. It was her father who came to her rescue. When she tried to lodge a complain, Nanglor Police Station refused to record it on technical ground while Kanjhawala Police Station told her such things were normal between husband and wife. Finally at the intervention of an NGO, Crime Against Women Police Station at Kirti Nagar registered it on June 14, 2004 but diluted it into a dowry case. Though she wanted divorce and punishment for the rapist, her in-laws were adamant and wanted her back. Such is the sad plight of women who are not as strong as Abida.

Even more helpless is the rape victim when the rapist is someone in the family or a relation. Attempts are made to malign, hush up and dismiss the charges. Few victims get justice. Muslim women are particularly vulnerable as

the case of Imarana shows. Ali Muhammad, resident of Charhawal in the district of Muzaffarnagar in Uttar Pradesh raped his daughter – in – law Imrana on June 14<sup>th</sup>, 2005. Not only the village Panchayat but even Darul – Uloom of Deoband declared the marriage dissolved as a consequence. More bizarre, they asked her to accept Noor Mohammad (her husband) as her “Son” and spend seven months in isolation to purify herself to qualify as the father – in – law’s wife: All India Muslim Personal Law Board concurred with them. Only the All India Muslim Women’s Personal Law Board struck a note of discord. Its president Shaista Ambar warned that this decision will be misused by Muslim Society to get rid of unwanted woman. Anyone who lusts after his daughter – in – law would rape her and then take her as his wife. She was right. Several cases of the type have been reported from different parts of India since then. Religion is supposed to be a guardian of morality. But the interpreters of religion seem to be zealous in favoring and rewarding rapists for a misdeed which is ignoble from the point of view of ethics and punishable under law.

There are three instances of suicide in Shashi Deshpande’s novels. Sulu tai in *The Binding Vine* commits suicide. Her husband, Prabhakar has raped Kalpana and the latter is lying unconscious since then. Having learned her husband’s misdeed, she asked her sister what to do. As she is angry, Sulu goes back home, gives breakfast to her husband and commits suicide. (BV 89)

Then, Kusum ends her life in *That Long Silence* (1989). A mentally sick mother of three daughters, she is avoided by her family and relations. She

lives with a distant but kind and sympathetic relation, Jaya. Eventually she insists on going to her family and jumps there in a dry well and dies of broken neck. The novelist offers an explanation of the tragedy:

“May be her fate was sealed when she was born to those feckless, hopeless parents of hers. A father who cared for nothing but smoking and movies, who never worked a day in his life; a mother whose world centred round her youngest, the baby on her lap, while the rest of her kids ran around in wild abandon, unkempt, dirty, unfed”. (TLS 22)

There in another case of suicide in *Small Remedies* (2001), that of a painter. The young man goes to the house of a friend who is seriously ill to console his daughter of fifteen. Eventually he has sexual encounter with her. Perhaps that is the reason of his suicide at a young age. ( SR 237, 262-269) The painter is distantly related to that girl, Madhu by being the son of a widow who had become the mistress of Leela’s father, Madhu’s aunt. It is quite likely, he feels remorseful after his sudden, impulsive deed and finding no way to expiate his sin, he cuts short his life. His mother’s conduct may have contributed to his uneasiness to some extent.

Suicide is an option a person chooses rarely and only in despair, generally speaking, everybody strives to live and stakes a lot for the purpose. Bankruptcy, disgrace, disappointment in love, prolonged illness with little hope of recovery, possibility of detection and punishment for grave offenses are some

of the main factors leading to such a mishap. Young boys and girls take recourse to suicide when their parents expect too much from them and they find themselves incapable of realising their dreams. Mental worries lead older people to commit suicide sometimes. However if the instances of Sulu tai, Kusum and the painter have any significance, the message is clear. There ought to be no communication gap in the family and no tensions. Parents are expected to be responsible, considerate and sympathetic to their children and husbands must care for their wives. Those who shirk from their duty spoil the lives of their near ones and bear the responsibility for suicides.

We find a reference to dowry in *Roots and Shadows*. Akka has settled the marriage of her grand daughter, Padmini (generally called Mini) with a boy who has simply passed S. S. C. Despite his coarse features, inadequate education and unemployment, he is deemed a suitable match for Mini. An amount of ten thousand rupees is paid as a dowry to him and also all the wedding expenses. Mini herself deems that a good deal as she is neither educated nor beautiful. She accepts the arrangement gracefully as there seems to be no option before her. “What choice do I have, Indu?” she says. (RS 125) She is past twenty – four and she has to marry, so she thinks any man will do. Sumitra who objects to dowry in case of Mini, was herself keen on getting her daughter Lata married in a prosperous business family but the negotiations failed simply because Akka refused to pay the dowry. (RS 64-65) This shows

that not all people who talk a lot against dowry are not necessarily principled, some of them do not practice what they preach.

That is not unexpected as dowry is an old disease of Indian society and still quite in vogue. Born in Hindu society, it is affecting other religious communities too. Despite the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1986, the number of dowry deaths increased from 1912 in 1987 to 5154 in 1991 and cases of cruelty by the husband and his relations increased from 11603 in 1989 to 15941 in 1991. According to the National Crimes Bureaus 6995 dowry deaths were reported in the year 2000. Among the mega cities, the share of Delhi was as high as 19.9 percent. Apart from the dowry deaths, 45778 incidents of torture by husbands or in – laws were reported. Though that number dropped by 28 percent across the country, Madurai reported an increase of 195.9 percent and Hyderabad, 200 percent. The culprits, mostly resourceful and educated, are rarely punished if even arrested. The practice of wife – beating remains though it varies from region to region and class to class. However, such cases are seldom reported to the police.

In *Roots and Shadows*, Krishna, son of Sunanda fails twice in his SSC and she claims it was done deliberately as the candidate was a Brahmin. The novelist does not agree with such attitude: Indu expresses her views clearly in the novel: “I had been hearing of this bogeyman ‘they’ since my return. ‘They’ refused us jobs; ‘they’ refused us promotions; and now they are failing us in our exams. ‘They’ had become the scapegoats for our failures, our

weakness, our faults, injustice.” (RS 137) Again, “...it is the weak, the incompetent, the undeserving who sit and moan. There are others who effortlessly scale the walls of injustice, who overcome barriers by ignoring them.” (RS 137) She cites the case of Vithal who was marching ahead against all odds bravely.

The other thing pointed out in the same novel is that people fail mostly because they aspire beyond their abilities and aptitude. Sunil, the son of Madhav, a third class B.Sc., wants to do Business Management. Naturally he finds himself in a private institute “where you pay so much money and at the end of the year they give you a diploma that’s not worth the paper its printed on.” (RS 65) Similarly, Sharad with a third class wants to become a doctor or simply because of prestige and money associated with it. (RS 46-47) Indu saves the situation for him and he prospers in hotel business.

The real problem according to the novelist is that some careers are deemed traditionally respectable (law, teaching, government office jobs etc.). But all people are not suitable for such jobs. That is the source of trouble in many cases. People vary in skills, abilities, attitudes etc. and it is not sensible to ignore individual variations.

They refuse us jobs – that line in *Roots and Shadows* points to a problem that occupies not an insignificant place in our national life. Reservation comes like a boon or bane to the job – seekers depending on circumstances. India since 1950 has witnessed the ever – expanding phenomenon of

reservation. Initially the constitution of India provided certain concession to the depressed sections of society called Scheduled Casts and Scheduled Tribes. Some seats in the parliament and state assemblies were set apart for them which others could not contest. There was similar provision in respect of Government services. Then Government Aided or Sponsored Institutions were brought under the provisions of reservation too. Next the principle of reservation was applied to the admission to the Institutions of Higher Education, Medical Colleges and Engineering Colleges etc. Finally a new category called Other Backward Classes (OBC) was added to the list of beneficiaries. Now, the politicians are planning to extend the benefit of reservation to Religious Minorities. As propriety of such extensions is often challenged the Supreme Court has set a limit – not more than 50 per cent of the jobs can be now reserved.

As more and more people feel threatened, they react in numerous ways. Initially, the protests were sporadic, though not always mild going to the point of self – immolation sometimes. Now, with the appearance of bodies like SACK (Students against Competitions and Kickbacks) and YE (Youth for Equality), now it has got an organized form. Though the protests remain ignored and ineffective so far, it does not mean they are meaningless.

Judging from the results as seen during the last 57 years, the policy of reservation has failed to benefit those it was designed for. This is because all the poor and backward do not necessarily belong to S.C., S.T. or OBC. As

Abhiroop Lahiri puts it, there are just as many impoverished Mukherjees, Banerjees and Lahiries as the OBCs amongst our hungry millions.

A study in 1997 indicates only six per cent of the Dalit families benefit from the government policy. In the country as a whole, members of the SC and ST combined did not receive even three per cent of the degrees in medicine or engineering, though together they did add up to merely one-fourth of the population noted a study by Sowell in 2004. Quotas for SC in schools and government services remain largely unfulfilled. Reservations serve as the mask to hide the poverty that prevents people to get requisite qualifications for the jobs. It seems more sensible to open the jobs to qualified claimants available rather than leaving the vacancies unfulfilled.

Then, the policy has benefited some of the beneficiaries more at the expense of others and raised the demand for quotas within quotas. Thus, though the Chamars constituted but 17 per cent of the population of Maharashtra, they got 35 per cent of the medical seats. In Haryana they got 80 per cent of the scholarships at under graduate level and 65 per cent at the graduate level while 18 of the 37 SC groups got no scholarships at all. In Bihar with 12 SC groups in the state, merely two groups accounted for the 61 per cent in colleges and the Chamars were one of them.

Moreover, while quotas for OBCs are generally filled to capacity, more and more castes are being added to that category. It is a moot question if they are really backward. The Yadavas in the North and the Lingayats in the South,

for example, are economically powerful enough. In Bihar, the OBC industrialists have investments worth 19.99 crore and immovable property worth 19.99 lakh.

Figures about the land ownership too given below lead to a similar conclusion:

<u>Land</u>	<u>Owned by the S.C.</u>	<u>Owned by ST</u>	<u>Owned by OBC</u>
Rural	9%	11.2%	43.5%
Urban	4.8%	3.3%	36.8%

Dr. Abu Saleh Sharif, the well-known economist who put together the formidable data and wrote the Sachar Committee Report had the following to say about the policy of reservations:

“Reservations for what? Reservation for whom? Reservation for Muslims will benefit only the rich. How do you empower the poor? The answer does not lie in giving them one IAS job or one I.I.T. admission. How do you make a lot of students continue school? How do you make a lot of girl complete matriculation? Learn skill in technology institution? That should be the mission to push Muslims up.” What Dr. Sharif says about Muslims in no less applicable to others. Dr. Sharif is right in observing : “This debate about reservation is nothing more than politics.” (Outlook 4 Dec., 2006)

In order to help the economically deprived sections of the society, education must be provided at every stage in the real sense of the term. The state should bear all the expenses. The teacher and student ratio must be improved and brought to the level of countries like Japan and education must be compulsory and residential. That will prepare the learners to earn their seats in the institutes of higher learning automatically and get the jobs they deserve without difficulty. Thus the tension and resentment in the society as well as corruption and deterioration of standard will disappear.

What is often forgotten by vote-seekers is the fact that compromise in respect of quality is highly undesirable in case of admission to the Institutions of Higher Learning. Moreover, there are certain jobs where just any person will not do as the merit matters. Jobs of teachers, doctors and engineers are instances to the point. Needless to say, society needs meritorious people for such jobs, persons born in certain castes.

As a matter of fact, the very idea of reservation is a legacy of the British. Lord Curzon initiating the policy in 1905 by banning jobs for Bengali Hindus. Later preferential treatment to Muslims and Sikhs was introduced as a part of the policy of Divide and Rule. During the period 1909 – 1919 reservations for Muslims became well established. In 1935, job reservation for the backward castes was introduced for political reasons. What we have seen since the British left, is more and more extension of the same. The British hoped

to perpetuate their rule by dividing people along caste and religious lines. Their successors hope to save capitalism with the same method.

Sashi Deshpande's treatment of the problem of reservation in *Roots and Shadows* as shown above is defensive. She believes that as the forefathers of the higher castes have sinned in the past, so the present generation must atone for it. That reminds me of the logic of Hindu communalists who demand atonement from the Muslim for the sins (real or imagined) committed by Muslim rulers centuries ago. Such settling of accounts with the past is hardly a rational approach.

Shashi Deshpande pays some attention to the problem of prostitution in one of her novels. In *Come Up and Be Dead* (1983) call girl business, a form of prostitution goes on in a hotel called 'Open Sesame'. The girls who enter in the business are not the victims of misery, forced by circumstances. Rather, they choose it of their own accord. The novelist seems to share the views of the police officer Prasad who maintains:

“And yet, the truth is that all of us carry this potentiality for evil within us. We have to struggle against it all over lives.” (CUBD 55)

The potentiality leads both men and women to immoral acts. Sanjay represents the male and Sharmila the female in the novel. Lasciviousness causes Sharmila to enter into an incestuous relationship with her cousin Sanjay at the age of fourteen and reduce herself to a tool of his design. She helps him trap school –

girls to become call girls. If one tries to find out the reason of their falling into the trap, lasciviousness will be held responsible for their conduct too.

The foolish notions of those girls about sex provide the other explanation. A section of girls thinks that physical relation is “just a bit of fun.” (CUBD 72) They are eager to become modern and believe that having boy – friends and lovers makes a girl smart and modern. Mridula is an instance to the point.

As Sonali remarks:

“She was a crazy girl, all right. She was dying to get into the mod crowd and have boy friends and go running all over town, doing nothing but being silly.” (CUBD 43)

Prostitution is the oldest profession in the world, they say. It has assumed various forms in different countries at different times. Once the profession had assumed such importance; influence and wealth that the need of a manual for the prostitutes was felt. The prostitutes of Pataliputra asked Dattak to prepare one for them. Dattak complied with the request. His work is lost now but Vatsyayan's *Kamasutra* incorporates the essentials of that work in the sixth book. Written to serve as a trade guide, the book discusses how prostitutes can train their new hand, gain clients and keep them, extract more and more money from them. Later Damodar Gupta wrote *Kuttanimatam* and Kshendra, *Samay Matrika* exposing the tricks of prostitutes and their mistress to save the simpletons. Short stories and novels in several languages have appeared during

the last two centuries. Mirza Hadi Ruswa's *Umrao Jan Ada* in Urdu, Premchand's *Sevasadan* in Hindi and Alexander Kuprin's *Yama* deserve mention in this connection. These works approach the profession from a different angle aiming to find out the social roots of the profession, if not to point to a way out.

So far as the treatment of Shashi Deshpande is concerned, it seems partial and conservative. To isolate the problem of prostitution from socio-economic roots and compulsions and to lay the blame at the door of inherent human potentiality is dangerous too.

If the root of evil lies in socio-economic conditions, people can strive to change those conditions and abolish prostitution. If human nature is at fault, all hope for change disappears.

Indu's relationship with Naren in *Roots and Shadows* ends suddenly with the death of the latter. Naren is the grandson of the old 'Father', a man unrelated to her who had become almost a member of her parental home. So she is familiar with Naren from her early life. However, her sexual relation with Naren grows and culminates when she comes back to her parental home several years after her marriage on the eve of Akka's death and stays there to attend Mini's marriage. Vatsyayana counted friendship since early life as one of the factors that lead to extra-marital relations. Naren fulfills that condition. The other factor that deserves attention is her dissatisfaction in married life.

As she says,

“I wish I could say we have achieved complete happiness. But I cannot fantasise,.... Neither love nor happiness come to us for the asking. But they can sneak up us when we least expect them.” (RS 13)

She loves Jayant too much, too passionately but instead of feeling happy about it, she is ashamed of it. The explanation of the strange phenomenon lies in the traditional mindset of Jayant which does not admit of female sexuality. It was far from sober and decent on the part of a woman to be passionate, to take initiative in his view. So “it shocks him to find passion in a woman. It puts him off.” (RS 83) So, Indu is compelled to take recourse to deception, to pretend to be passive and unresponsive.

Naren, on the other hand, has a better understanding of female psychology. He is aware of the elementary truth that for both men and women sexuality is natural, that there is nothing abnormal in being passionate for either of them. He realizes that Indu expects something from Jayant which he is unable to give her. Indu is pleased to find she need not pretend with Naren. So love and happiness sneak up unexpectedly as described in Indu’s own words:

“An ecstasy filled my body and I could not be still any more. There was a joyous sense of release of passion I could experience and show and participate in. I clung to him convulsively, marvelling that I did not have to hold myself back.” (RS 152)

This relationship ends abruptly as Naren is drowned and Indu returns to her husband determined to build her home on honesty. However, she is not going to tell Jayant about her relationship with Naren.

“For that was not important. That had nothing to do with the two of us and our life together.” (RS 187)

If that sounds hypocritical, Jayant alone is to blame for it. Indu’s marriage with Jayant has taught her to reveal nothing but what he wants to see, to say to him nothing but what he wants to hear.

This relationship is interpreted differently by critics and opinions vary about its significance. Some think Indu realises her fault in the extra-marital relationship with Naren while others disagree.

Thus Anita Singh believes that Indu “suffers no guilt in her extra-marital relationship with Naren. (Bala 2001: 34)

Rammorthy remarks : “This sheds a brilliant light on Indu’s awareness of her autonomy and her realization, that she is a being, and not a dependent on Jayant.” (Singh 1991: 124)

Parvati Bhatnagar, on the other hand, takes Indu to task for her conduct: “Indu’s casual and matter of fact attitude to what she had done is shocking. Have our morals really gone so low that women commit this sin for nothing, just to prove that they do not lack courage? Is this really representative of Indian women?” (Dhawan 1991: 129)

Sunita Reddy, holds a view diametrically opposed to it. Indu in her opinion, “refuses to be consumed by guilt after committing adultery. She in fact revels in the act with wild abandon and deliberately savors the memory of it, refusing to wipe it out of her mind.” (Reddy 2001:42) Referring to the adverse criticism of P. Bhatnagar, she retorts : “Perhaps this is Deshpande’s answer to the double standards practiced by our society where only men are allowed to take sexual liberties.” (Reddy 2001:43)

Much has been written and is likely to be written in the same fashion. So, it is better to conclude with three observations. First, Indu’s affair with Naren is incidental and does not affect her marital relation. Indu is well aware of the fact that Naren “could never be anyone’s beloved or husband” as she puts it before Mini. (RS 83)

Her love for Jayant whom she married much against the wishes of her family, is deep and lasting. Second the novelist seems to believe that repressed libido distorts and weakens the personality of a person while sexual gratification strengthens it. Indu’s sexual encounter with Naren contributes to her strength and enables her to resolve her problem. Thus it has been introduced in the novel to bear out Freud. Third, modern literature unlike the ancient is not didactic. It does not aim at presenting models of virtuous men and women before readers. It tends to be realistic and therefore, its characters are far from perfect. They are ordinary mortals striving to solve their problems, seeking happiness and fulfillment, trying to learn through trial and error. So the sexual encounter

deserves to be seen as a warning to insensitive husbands who fail to recognize female sexuality and tend to ignore it.

Sarita's relationship with Boozie is also extra – marital at least in appearance, though critics have paid little attention to that for obvious reasons. Boozie is one of her teachers at the medical college. She comes into close contact with him while doing her first house post. Boozie is a good surgeon and good teacher. He teaches not only Pediatrics but also how to speak good English with proper accent, how to dress elegantly and simply, how to enjoy good food, how to read and write etc. Her husband having belied her expectations, she finds it difficult to live a respectable life due to financial difficulties. The door to prosperity does not open for her even after completing M. B. B. S. Boozie comes to her rescue at that stage. He gives her work in a research scheme that brings some badly needed extra money every month. Then she becomes her Registrar. In less than two years she passes her M.D. and four years later, she becomes an Assistant Secretary at a suburban hospital with a consulting room of her own. Thus Boozie plays a great role in building her career.

The relationship is entirely that of a teacher and student. Boozie's interest in Sarita lies in the fact that she is a woman even though married. Sarita tolerates it when he puts his hand on her shoulder, slaps her on her back, holds her hand or hugs her. She finds it necessary to please him as all the talents of her husband have failed to bring money enough for a decent living. Her husband dislikes Boozie but does not ask her why Boozie has given her money to set up

a consulting room of her own. Such cowardice and opportunism make him despicable in her eyes. As for Boozie she cannot hate him because “behind the facade of aggressive, virile masculinity there was nothing at all.” (DHNT 94) So Boozie represents the peculiar type of men who build an image of masculinity to hide the absence of it. Boozie has been introduced into the novel to expose the spinelessness of Sarita’s husband.

In *The Binding Vine* Urmila’s friendship with Dr. Bhaskar Jain borders on extra – marital relationship but does not develop into it. Urmila, an educated woman, a lecturer in a college has married a man of her choice and needs no monetary support from him. Her husband, an officer in the navy, remains far from home most of his time. When, he visits his home occasionally he seeks to satisfy her with sex. That frustrates her as she longs for emotional security and wants to reach his spiritual centre. She loves her husband and wishes to live with him and children permanently like a good house wife. Her daughter’s death leaves her emotionally disturbed with no option but to cope with her grief alone. Dr. Bhaskar Jain, a sympathetic listener steps in her life in that situation. He understands her feelings and helps her accept her loss. Her near ones like Innie and Vanaa dissuade her from going out with Bhaskar but she revolts against traditional limitations to assert her individuality. Bhaskar takes her to his residence and introduces her to his mother and tells her that she wants him to get married to a “sweet, homely, fair convent educated girl” but he has “fallen in love with a dark, sharp – tongued married woman.” (BV 161)

That open declaration of love ends abruptly their relationship as her love for Kishore has a firm hold on her married life. Overcoming all temptations she chooses “to just think virtue and chastity and being a good wife.” (BV 168)

There are several cases of extra – marital relationship in the *Small Remedies* – all meant to serve some purpose. Savitri bai’s father has a mistress, a famous thumri – singer. Though people look in amusement and gossip about it as he visits her regularly, they are not outraged as that is deemed normal for a man, a wealthy one and head of a family at that : “That he had a mistress was accepted, a wife from one’s own class, a mistress from another – this was normal.” (SR 220)

It is otherwise in case of Savitribai Indorekar. She is married and belongs to a respectable family but elopes with her tabla player to realize her dream of becoming a famous musician. She lives in a strange locality among people totally unknown to her. She finds there an opportunity to reach her goal. It is a story of success in that sense. However, she fails morally as she hides part of her life to her biographer by blanking out her association with her lover, Ghulam Saab and Munni, their daughter. Later, Ghulam Saab returns to his wife in old age who accepts her reluctantly. The only problem she faces is his long association with Savitribai has made him vegetarian. Savitribai at that stage desperately seeks respectability by putting on her mangalsutra which she had discarded earlier. Munni, her daughter begins with dissociating herself from her father, Ghulam Saab early in childhood and goes to the extent of denying her

mother too later. When she meets her childhood friend Madhu in a bus, she refuses to be called Munni or Meenakshi Indorekar. She introduces herself as Shailaja Joshi. This is because there are different yard sticks for men and women in our society. Deviations from convention are ignored in case of men, particularly the rich ones but not so in case of women. Few women have courage enough to cope with the problem without resorting to suppression of truth and even downright falsehood.

The case of Madhu's father is but the other proof of it. He is a widower. He is bringing up a daughter on his own with only a male servant at home. He ignores religious customs and rituals, smokes and drinks and has a mistress. Madhu learns about the mistress from her friend Munni at an age when she is unable to make out what it means. The conservative folk in Neemgaon disapprove the ways of Savitribai but do not bother about him.

As the novelist puts it:

“His peculiarities and follies were overlooked, because he was a doctor, and a very trusted and popular doctor at that. And of course, being a man, he could get away with much.” (SR 138-139)

Leela's father had an affair with a widow. Her mother tells her about it shortly before her death. The widow was the daughter of Leela's aunt. She was brought in to help her mother as the latter fell ill after the birth of her daughter. The widow stayed at Leela's parental home for sometime with her son and left.

Nobody bothered about it and even Leela could not have known about it if her mother had not unburdened the secret to her.

The son of that window casts a shadow on the married life of Madhu, Madhu goes to an exhibition and comes across a painting bearing the title ‘The Mistress.’ She looks into the name of the painter in the catalogue and reads: ‘He died young, he committed suicide.’ (SR 238) That reminds her of what Leela had told her as well as what happened once in her life – a sexual encounter with that widow’s son. He had come to console her during her father’s illness, but the physical contact aroused him and she too was receptive. That single sexual encounter in her pre – marital life at the age of 15 slips out of her memory. As she does not want to hide anything, she tells her about it.

That makes their relations sour:

“Purity, chastity, intact hymen – these are the things Som is thinking of, these are the truths that matter...Som cannot believe me. He won’t believe there is nothing more to tell. He thinks I am holding back.” (SR 263)

There are extra – marital relations in ‘Moving on’ too – namely, Malu’s relation with Shyam and Manjari’s with Raman Kumar. Manjari gives up studying medicine and marries Shyam, a Sindhi cinematographer much against the wishes of her family. Later Shyam has an affair with her sister making her pregnant. It ends tragically as Malu dies of a post – natal complication after giving birth to a baby girl. Malu’s death is followed by

Shyam's suicide. Manjari adopts their baby girl, Sachi as her own daughter.

Thus Manjari is betrayed by her sister and husband and the affair brings happiness to none. Her mother's desperate attempts to protect her daughter Malu from society show how patriarchal norms make the women vulnerable all the time.

Manjari's relationship with her tenant, Raman Kumar stands apart from all the above. Manjari is a widow who has undergone period of struggle and strain. She is self supporting, refuses financial assistance from her father, lives among strangers, withstands threats from mafia and turns down Raja's repeated proposals to marry disapproving his role of a protecting male in her life. True, she fails to her sexuality. She negotiates with the relentless demands of body by sleeping with her tenant Raman Kumar, a much younger man. That she does on her own terms, at her whim and desire, not his: "only the body, his body, only my body, my starved body. No thought, no feelings, only sensations." (SR 257) This response to the call of her body is revealed to Raja but she does not permit him or anyone to dictate. She moves on and lives on her own life.

Shashi Deshpande's depiction of extra – marital relations as given above is mostly realistic, though few women go to the extent Manjari has gone. Both men and women enter into relation with persons other than their spouse sometimes. That takes place not only before marriage but even after that. In the novels discussed above, one that of Madhu with the painter is pre – marital, all the rest are post – marital. Such relations seem to be as old as the institution of

marriage. Vatsyayana devotes the fifth book of his *Kamasutra* to discussion about extra – marital relations. He analyses the reasons that lead a married woman to seek a different lover and suggests ways and means to prevent growth and culmination of such relations. Later works on erotics follow him to some extent. Numerous stories, novels and poems in the east and the west have been written on the theme. Deshpande adds something new to that starting from a feminist stand.

Caste is a traditional feature of Hindu society. It leads to differences and conflicts. Shashi Deshpande is aware of the caste issues and gives a glimpse of the caste hysteria in *A Mater of Time*. Gopal's father "disclaimed his identity as a Brahmin out of disgust when they reviled him for marrying his brother's widow" and being a Brahmin meant nothing to Gopal. (MT 218) Yet, he was charged with having written an article from the platform of Brahmanism and abused as 'bastard of a Brahmin.' (MT 218) They hit him with their fists, their feet, anywhere, everywhere and compelled him to retract his article. (MT 213) That shows the irrationality of judging a person by his birth.

Unfortunately, such things happen not only in the backward areas of India but caste consciousness and caste tensions seem to be increasing in Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Socio – political leaders of our country have dreamt since long of a casteless society. Besides a lot of propaganda, numerous laws and administrative measures have been adopted for the uplift of the Dalits and backward sections of the society. But all that has failed to remove

caste differences. This is because electoral politics in India rests mainly on caste, language and religion and it is easiest to get votes on caste loyalty. Reservation has contributed not a little to tension. It has become a well – established practice to deify or malign persons on the grounds of nothing else but the caste origin. Gopal in *The Matter of Time* is a poor victim of that practice.

British imperialism played communal card to divide the people to perpetuate their rule. They left the country divided in two parts—Indian Union and Pakistan. That created problems, even tensions but communal harmony was restored soon and lasted for decades. However, communal forces raised their head high during the last two decades of the twentieth century. Demolition of the Mosque of Ayodhya on Dec. 6, 1992 marked the sad turn of the events. It was followed by serial blasts and riots in Bombay in 1993.

We find a reference to these events in *Small Remedies*. Madhu's son, Aditya, a promising youth is killed during the riots. But the novel also deals with an incident which shows the victory of sanity. Savitribai's guru used to teach music at Bhavani Temple in Bhavanipur. After his death, his disciples began to organize an all – night performance on his death anniversary every year. Rashid Mian, his famous student performed at the first anniversary. So it is but natural that Hasina, a student of Savitribai is chosen to perform at the latest anniversary. But under the changed, tense situation since 1992 there are people who do not like the idea of a Muslim singing on the occasion. Some outsiders

have crept in the locality to create trouble. So, one day when Madhu, wearing salwar kameez, is going out on bike with Hari some unknown people mistaking her for Hasina attack and injure them. Hasina is unnerved and refuses to perform but Madhu and others insist and persuade her. Madhu writes a powerful article about the significance of the anniversary appealing all to perpetuate the tradition of communal harmony. At last, Hasina performs well without any disturbances. The incident suggests that sane people can thwart the communal forces if they are determined and united.

Thus we find that Shashi Deshpande is aware of a wide range of problems and succeeds in displaying, their impact on social beings, thereby challenging people to face them sanely and bravely.