TROPOLOGIES OF INDIANNESS IN ANGLOPHONE COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL SOUTH ASIAN FICTION

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Department of English and the Collaborative Program in South Asian Studies
University of Toronto

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Abstract

While previous studies have explored the literary representation of “India” as a place, a colony, or a modern nation-state, this dissertation focuses on the idea of Indianess as a civilizational essence within the field of Anglophone colonial and postcolonial South Asian fiction. The central finding of this project is that Indianness is often imagined in fiction through a system of recurrent tropes. These tropes include the Neo-Vedantic concept of metaphysical oneness (brahman); the centripetal dynamics of Sanskritization; the ontological modes of “impersonal” being; the Hegelian allegory of “History”; and most importantly, the rhetoric of caste subjectivity (varna). The use of these tropes in fiction reveals a critical disassociation with contemporary grand narratives of “India” as a postcolonial nation-state as well as the fascist Hindutva ideology of purified Hindu-ness. For these reasons, this project uses the term Indutva to classify the unique tropologies of Indianess within colonial and postcolonial South Asian literature.

The primary texts of this study are E. M. Forster’s A Passage to India (1924), Raja Rao’s The Serpent and the Rope (1960), and Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things (1997). In Passage, Forster illustrates his idea of Indianness through the rituals of
the Gokul Ashtami festival, its Brahminical agents of varnic order, and its heterotopic confrontations with History. In Serpent, Indianness is explored through the marital crises of Rao’s Brahminical protagonist and the symbolic rebirth of varnic Indianness in post-imperial Europe. Finally, in Small Things, Roy engages an allegorical, counter-Indutva critique of civilizational Indianness, as represented by the “History” of violence against lower-caste “Untouchables.”

This study of Indianness in fiction is grounded in a historical and theoretical framework that takes late eighteenth-century British Orientalism as a starting point for the modernity of Indianness, and it also draws on Sanskrit and vernacular Indian discourses of religion, caste, and metaphysics. The methodology of this project thus draws equally from postcolonial and pre-colonial sources.
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Chapter 1
Indutva: An Introduction

1 Preface

In 1997, and on the occasion of India’s 50th anniversary of independence from British rule, Sunil Khilnani had published a collection of essays titled The Idea of India, focusing on the political vision of India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Khilnani idealizes the Nehruvian idea of India as a form of liberal, secular democracy and a model of postcolonial modernity, and his book has since achieved great acclaim, high sales, and multiple editions in both South Asia and the West. For the project of this dissertation, the significance of Khilnani’s work lies primarily in its titular emphasis on the role of the imagination in the historical development of modern India as a political entity. However, it is worth remembering that Nehru’s is merely one idea of India within a larger historical continuum. This continuum includes the grand and popular narratives of mystic India; primitive India; Aryan India; Mughal India; despotic India; feminine India; third world India; the erotic India of Khajuraho, tantric sex, and the Kama Sutra; the Gandhian idea of the village as the “soul” of India; and the ultra-right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) narcissistic idea of India as a global, neoliberal superpower (“India is shining”). While some of these ideas are touched on in this dissertation, the primary focus of the research here is on the idea of Indian civilization, its imagined set of essences, and most importantly, its literary representation in Anglophone South Asian novels of the colonial and postcolonial periods.¹

The central argument of this project is that the essentialist idea of civilizational Indianness is represented in the aforementioned field of fiction through a tropology – a system of literary tropes. These tropes include the concept of caste (and varna in particular); the metaphysical concept of universal oneness (brahman); the centripetal

¹ The category of the “South Asian novel” is defined here according to the subject matter of the work,
dynamics of Sanskritization; the Hegelian rhetoric of “History”; and the ontological notion of the “impersonal” as a mode of being. This tropology is also at the service of allegory, as evidenced in the primary texts of this study: E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924); Raja Rao’s *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960); and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997). The allegorical aspects of these novels are an important reminder that their symbolic representations of Indianness are rooted in literary imagination, rather than empirical knowledge. Thus, the readings presented in this study are neither literal nor realist. The notion that Indianess is a fictional idea is central to this project, and the objective here is to deconstruct this idea within the field of fiction itself.

In addition to issues of representation, this project frames the idea of Indianess as the focus of a literary tradition that spans the twentieth century and includes the voices of Western as well as South Asian narrators. These voices are also diverse in perspective and attitude; there are those who celebrate Indianess (Rao), those who critique it (Roy), and those who remain ambivalent about it (Forster). While the textual objects of this tradition belong to the category of fiction, the readings presented in this project foreground an engagement with other intellectual traditions in English as well as Sanskrit and vernacular South Asian languages (*bhasas*), the totality of which necessitates a theoretical framework synthesizing pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial discourses on caste, metaphysics, religion, modernity, and other issues that are central to the tropes and allegories of Indianess discussed in this project.

Finally, this study intends to not only analyze this tradition, but to name it: *Indutva*. The term is not entirely of my own coinage, but it is used here uniquely as a means of striking a contrast with the more widely studied and controversial concept of *Hindutva*. \(^2\) In both

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\(^2\) M. D. Nalapat appears to be the first to coin the term “Indutva”, most notably in the title of his 1999 collection of journalistic articles on Indian politics, history and civilization. A few other journalists in India – Sudheendra Kulkarni and Jug Suraiya – have used it as well. For this small group of writers, Indutva represents a philosophical alternative to Hindutva ideology, characterized by anti-communal tolerance and inter-caste inclusivity on a civilizational scale. Suraiya qualifies Indutva further as a philosophy of “spiritual secularism” (para. 7) because it does not abandon the field of religion entirely, thus placing its ideology in between Hindutva and Western forms of secular, political modernity. This particular use of Indutva does not appear to have circulated far outside this narrow group of intellectuals in India, and it is certainly different from the literary tradition of Indutva discussed in this dissertation where caste
cases, the Sanskrit suffix “-tva” is loosely translated to signify “-ness” and therefore signifies an essential quality. Coined by V. D. Savarkar, Hindutva is the umbrella term for various modern social and political movements that have promoted far-right, fascist ideologies of Hindu nationalism throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The use of Indutva in this dissertation is intended to distinguish the literary tradition of narrating Indianness from that of Savarkar and other Hindutva ideologues on two grounds: first, the idea of Indianness in Forster, Rao, and Roy is constituted rhetorically as a civilizational essence, rather than one of nation; and secondly, while each of the three novels’ vision of Indianness is engaged with the politics of caste, it is not necessarily restricted to representations of Hindu religious communities. In fact, the rhetoric of “India” is generally preferred over that of “Hinduism” by all three novelists, thus challenging the reader’s impulse to equate Indutva fiction with Hindutva fascism. As emphasized at different points in this dissertation, there are serious social and political problems with Indutva visions of metaphysical, caste-based Indianness, and I do not in any way intend to present this research as an Indutva apologist. However, I also recognize that the problems – and more specifically, the violence – of Indianness require a very different set of analytical tools than those conventionally used for studies of Hindu nationalism and Hindu religious practice.

The next five sections of this chapter define, illustrate, and contextualize the key theoretical concepts that are at work within Forster, Rao, and Roy’s fictional tropologies of Indianness. The first section introduces the concept of civilization and explores its significance within the historical, political, and discursive contexts of early Indology, Orientalism, and British rule in eighteenth-century India. The second section turns to the pre-colonial period of ancient, Vedic India and examines the discourse of caste, highlighting the significance of language and ritual practice as points of contrast with hierarchies are central and the concept of civilization is privileged over nation. I also want to make it known that I was not aware of Nalapat, Kulkarni, and Suraiya’s rhetoric and discourse of Indutva until a much later stage in this project. The idea of Indutva as a literary tradition was developed independently of Nalapat et al.
Orientalist traditions. The third section presents definitions and illustrations for the concept of Sanskritization and the element of centripetality as factors on the construction of caste subjectivities through dynamic relations of power and knowledge. From here, the fourth section of this chapter returns to the modern period and the discourse of anti-colonial Indian thought in the early twentieth-century, where Neo-Vedanta emerges as a non-fictional Indutva tradition of religious, political, and cultural philosophy, foregrounding an obsession with two key tropes of Indianness: caste (varna) and oneness (brahman), both of which are central to Forster and Rao. This section also includes a discussion of Hegel and the role of “India” in his equally imaginary and allegorical vision of History as a “World-Spirit” as well as the rhetorical significance of History as such within both Neo-Vedanta and Indutva fiction. Finally, the fifth section of this chapter situates this dissertation within the context of previous literary studies on the representation of India as well as debates over the rhetorical and representational politics of Indianness within modern Anglophone and bhasa fiction.

1.1 The Colonial Origins of Civilizational Indianness

The historical roots of Indianness, of the idea of India’s civilizational essence, lie in the field of Indology – the study of India. While this field has grown over the last two centuries to prominently include German, French, and South Asian intellectuals, its progenitors in the late eighteenth-century were British men: Henry T. Colebrook, Nathaniel B. Halhed, and most notably, Sir William Jones, who founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784. For this generation of Indologists, the pursuit of India’s civilizational essence was presupposed by the conviction that all civilizations possessed their own distinctive essence; if a society did not have one, it would not be regarded as “civilized.” More importantly, the evidence of a civilizational essence, however imagined, affirmed the larger project of theorizing the essence of a universal reality. Ronald Inden, a late twentieth-century critic of Indology, explains further:

Two of the assumptions built into the 'episteme' of Indology are that the real world (whether that is material and determinate or ideal and ineffable) consists of
essences and that that world is unitary. Entailed in these two assumptions is a further assumption. It holds that there exists a 'human nature' which itself consists of a unitary essence. It is also supposed that, at a lower level, each culture or civilization embodies a similarly unitary essence. (1986 402)

None of the novels selected for analysis in this study depict Indian life in such singular, homogeneous terms, but they do highlight various essences that portray a unified vision of Indianness within the larger contexts of South Asian and global culture. These essences also serve to authenticate each novel’s fictional idea of Indianness, albeit in very different ways. In *A Passage to India*, the essences of Indian civilization are illustrated in the chaos of a Hindu religious festival, the Gokul Ashtami. In *The Serpent and the Rope*, they are enunciated through the marital crises of Rao’s diasporic, Brahminical protagonist, and strangely prophesied in a historical reconstruction of Queen Elizabeth II’s coronation, thus imagining the global spread of Indianness across post-imperial Europe. Finally, in *The God of Small Things*, various essences of Indianness are re-imagined allegorically as the singular sources of violence and trauma surrounding the death of Velutha, an “Untouchable” man.

As Inden explains in *Imagining India*, the history of Indology is marked by the scholarly practice of studying, translating, and classifying Indian civilization according to a recurring set of essences. These include the idea of India as a civilization under despotic rule; an economy of village-based societies; an intellectual tradition marked by its dreamy, non-rational consciousness; and finally, a system based on caste differences (2000 1). Among all of these, Inden points to the caste system as the key essence of Indian civilization, one that was imagined by scholars as “eternally ancient” (1).

There are some strong differences and similarities between the essentialisms of Indology and Indutva fiction. The idea of despotic India has very little value for this dissertation and the same is true for rural Indian economies, despite the rustic settings of Mau in *Passage*, Hariharapura in *Serpent*, and Ayemenem in *Small Things*. Similarly, both pre-colonial Advaita and modern Neo-Vedanta could be described as a “dreamy” and “non-rational” intellectual traditions, but their significance for this study of literary Indianness
is mostly with regards to their philosophical ideals of non-dualism and monism \((brahman)\), particularly in the novels of Forster and Rao. For Roy, the importance of metaphysics is indirectly suggested through her use of allegory, but there are otherwise no direct references to Neo-Vedanta or any other “dreamy” philosophical forms of Indianness in \textit{Small Things}. However, the one point where Indutva fiction converges with Indology is on the issue of caste. Caste is central to the representation of civilizational Indianness in all three novels of this study. However, as we will see, caste is imagined, defined, and represented in these novels according to ideas drawn from pre-colonial, Vedic Hinduism and modern Neo-Vedanta, rather than early Indology.

It bears noting that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the significance of Indology went beyond the pursuit of knowledge and intellectual improvement. It was historically a political instrument of British imperialism in South Asia – an argument raised by Inden as well as Bernard Cohn, Nicholas Dirks, and Richard King, among numerous other scholars of postcolonial studies. In order to take control of India's resources, early British administrators employed scholars to research and translate South Asian knowledge-traditions. Thus, as Cohn states, “In coming to India, [the British] unknowingly and unwittingly invaded and conquered not only a territory, but an epistemological space as well” (4). From a postcolonial perspective, this knowledge-power relationship marks Indology as a local variation of the larger global phenomenon Edward W. Said theorizes and critiques in \textit{Orientalism}. Orientalism as such is defined in Said’s “Introduction”:

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements of it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western \textit{style for dominating}, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient (my italics 3).

While there are numerous historical examples that illustrate the Orientalist style of early Indology, the most important case for this study is the collaborative relationship between Warren Hastings, the first British Governor-General of Bengal (1772-85) and “architect
of the British empire of India”, and his team of Indologists (Kulke and Rothermund 236). As Cohn points out, Hastings shared the belief that “the peoples of India, unlike the Indians and slaves of the New World, had an ancient civilization and forms of local self-governance that were stable and deeply entrenched” (58). Thus, he encouraged a group of younger servants of the East India Company to study the “classical” languages of India – Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic – as part of a scholarly and pragmatic project aimed [at] creating a body of knowledge that could… help the British define what was “Indian” and to create a system of rule that would be congruent with what were thought to be indigenous institutions. (61)

One important response to this pursuit of Indianness came from Sir William Jones and his Sanskrit-to-English translation of the *Manavadharmasastra* (also known as *Manusmriti* or more simply by its alleged author, *Manu*). The translation, titled *Institutes of Hindu Law: or, the Ordinances of Menu* (sic) in English, was proposed as the basis of a system of legal jurisprudence to be used in governing the East India Company’s Hindu subjects. In the context of Indutva literature, the *Institutes* served doubly as an important Orientalist contribution to the British empire’s grand narrative of caste as a key essence of Indian civilization.

By foregrounding caste within its tropology, Indutva fiction clearly bears a strong inheritance of Indological scholarship and Orientalist knowledge-power dynamics. However, as will be demonstrated in the readings of Forster, Rao, and Roy, there are also some critical points of discontinuity between the Orientalist definition of caste and those illustrated in Indutva fiction. These points become more evident when the discourse of caste in *Manu*, both the original Sanskrit text and its Anglophone, Indological translations, is contrasted with the other definitions and discourses of caste within Sanskrit literature and Vedic ritual practice.
1.2 Pre-colonial Concepts of Caste

As a legal text, Manu places strong emphasis on “the social obligations and duties of the various castes” (Dirks 34). Its definition of caste is primarily with reference to the four groups that are said to have come into being from the time of universal creation: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. In Sanskrit, this four-fold system of classifying caste differences is conceptualized as chaturvarna or more simply, varna.

Yet, as we will see below, Manu is neither the first nor the only pre-colonial text to theorize caste. Furthermore, varna is not the only word for “caste” within South Asian languages, Sanskrit or otherwise, and this also raises a problem for reading caste critically in Anglophone Indutva fiction.

In Sanskrit literary history, the textual origins of varna actually precede Manu and go back at least one millennium earlier to the “Purusa-Sukta” of the Rig Veda. Unlike Manu, “Purusa-Sukta” is not a legal document. It is a Sanskrit poem and also a work of mythology – key details that were conveniently disregarded by both Jones and Hastings in their drive to establish a colonial jurisprudence based on so-called “ancient” and “native” knowledge traditions. The narrative of the “Purusa-Sukta” deals with the ritual “sacrifice” of Purusa, “the cosmic giant” whose body represents all matter in the universe (Doniger 1981 29). The latter detail serves as an important reminder that its Vedic authors envisioned the sacrifice of Purusa as a cosmogony of the universe, rather than a creation story on the origins of subcontinental Indian civilization.

Through descriptions of bodily dismemberment, the “Purusa Sukta” narrates the origins of chaturvarna: “His mouth became the Brahmin; his arms were made into the Warrior [Kshatriya], his thighs the People [Vaishya], and from his feet the Servants [Shudra]

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3 The exact historical date of composition for each of these two texts is a little vague, and the figures vary from scholar to scholar. Generally, most contemporary scholars seem to locate the Rig Veda in the early half of the second millennium B.C.E; the range of differences here span from “1700-1500” B.C.E. (Doniger 2009 85) to “1300 to 1000” B.C.E. (Kulke and Rothermund 34). In the case of Manu, there is a stronger consensus on its origins; most scholars place it between 200 BCE to 200 C.E. (Doniger, Kulke and Rothermund, Olivelle, Sharma, and Thapar). In any case, the historical differences between the Rig Veda and Manu’s date of composition is likely to be in the range of a single millennium, if not more. As suggested above, this stretch of time is significant as a sign of some discontinuity between the two texts, despite their shared rhetoric of varna.
were born.” (X.90.11 in Doniger 1981 31). As an allegory, the poem presents the anatomy of Purusa as an explanation for the socio-religious hierarchy between the Brahmin and the non-Brahmin varna. This narrative and interpretation is also reproduced in the opening chapters of Manu, i.e., the “Excursus” on the “Occupations of Social Classes” (1.87-91). The tenth chapter of Manu then supplements the original chaturvarnic narrative of the “Purusa-Sukta” with three more “discourses” on the emergence of over fifty other castes. For example,

From a Brahmin man by a Vaisya girl is born a son called Ambastha; and by a Sudra girl, a Nisada, also called Parasava. From a Kshatriya man by a Sudra girl is born a son called Ugra, who is cruel in his behaviour and in his dealings, a being with the physical characteristics of both a Kshatriya and a Sudra… (10.8-9)

These additional castes are understood (if not directly referred to) as jatis, a term which many Indologists have translated as “sub-caste”. This particular translation also continues to survive in contemporary Hinduism and religious studies discourse, even though, as Wendy Doniger clarifies in The Hindus, “the authors of the dharma texts made it all up, for there is absolutely no historical evidence that the jatis developed out of varnas” (312). Much like the Orientalist notion of India as an essentially varnic civilization, these pre-colonial, Sanskrit discourses of varna-as-caste and jati-as-sub-caste appear to be based in literary imagination.

Given the pre-colonial context, the modern, colonial, Anglophone translation of caste and civilizational Indianness raises two critical problems for the present study of Indutva fiction. Firstly, the colonial discourse of pre-colonial South Asia as an essentially Brahminical, let alone Hindu, civilization is historically inaccurate. As Raf Gelders and S. N. Balagandhara argue, “Brahmins do not constitute any [political] organization” in the sense that “a pan-Indian Brahminical alliance did not exist before colonialism” (104). The whole subcontinent was never under the absolute rule of a single Brahmin hegemony, let alone what both Orientalist scholars and “Indophobic” critics (like James

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4 All direct references to Manu are found in Patrick Olivelle’s 2004 translation, The Law Code of Manu.
Mill and Thomas Babington Macaulay) regarded as a Brahmin “theocracy.” In fact, there have been instances where Brahmans occupied a secondary position to both the king and “the knights and fighting men” that would otherwise fall under the Kshatriya category (Dirks 19). There is also a long history of lower caste resistance to Brahminical hegemony: i.e., the advent of sramanic religious movements like Buddhism and Jainism in the fifth century BCE; the proliferation of vernacular bhakti movements throughout the millennium that preceded British colonialism during the eighth to the seventeenth century; and the emergence of Dalit activism, literature, and philosophy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The second problem is that although the rhetoric of caste is relevant for literary analyses of Indutva fiction, the definitions of caste do not easily match up with those of colonial Orientalism. For example, the novels of Forster and Rao inherit the grand narrative of India as an essentially varnic civilization, and in this manner they also deploy what Said conceptualizes as an Orientalist “style of thought” – a rhetorical mode of viewing the world in terms of Eastern, Indian, and caste essences as well as conceptualizing the latter in contrast to their Western or modern antitheses (2). The novels of Forster, Rao, and Roy also make references to jati, but they do not subscribe to the Orientalist translation of jati as “sub-caste.” Instead, they show a stronger affinity with contemporary studies of pre-colonial South Asian social and religious practices. What distinguishes the latter body of knowledge from colonial Orientalism is its engagement with archaeology, anthropology, and vernacular literatures and languages, rather than simply Sanskrit textual traditions.

5 “Indophobia” is Thomas R. Trautmann’s term for British and other Western critics of Orientalist scholarship. As both he and Dirks point out, while the Orientalists and the Indophobes were ideologically opposed to each other, they relied on the same body of Sanskrit knowledge as textual evidence for their arguments on Indian civilization’s ancient and supposedly uncontested Brahminical theocracy.

6 As Dirks notes, this observation is recorded in the travelogues of the sixteenth-century Portuguese explorer Duarte Barbosa, one of the earliest European writers on caste relations in India. With a focus on the Vijayanagara region, Barbosa’s writings also highlight a triadic, rather than a four-fold chaturvarnic, caste order.

7 This focus on both the field and the vernacular is also central to the methodological interventions of anthropologist M. N. Srinivas and bhasa literary theorist G. N. Devy.
In *Early India: From the Origins to 1300 AD*, Romila Thapar distinguishes the concept of *jati* from *varna* on the basis of etymology and social practice. She explains, “[j]ati derives its meaning from ‘birth’ which determines membership of a group and the status within it; it also determines rules relating to circles within which marriage could or could not take place and rules relating to the inheritances of property” (64). *Jati* represents a form of community defined by family, endogamy, and land rights as well as professional occupations and eating habits. One could argue that *jati* represents a form of religious community; to some extent, this is true. However, unlike *varna*, the significance of *jati* has little to do with mythology and metaphysics. Rather, *jati* functions within the empirical realm of social relations and material economy. Thapar elaborates this further in her theory of how *jati* communities developed historically through class-based tensions within *jana* or clan-based communities:

Hypothetically, a forest-clan would generally be a group of people sharing defined space, kinship relations, material culture, a near egalitarian status, custom and ritual. Where such a group begins to concede that there can be unequal access to resources among its members, and treats this differentiation as a hierarchical status inherited at birth, the elements of *jati* begin to surface. (65)

Thapar’s discussion is largely contextualized within the history of increased urbanization in the Indo-Gangetic Plain. The term *jati* was thus a sign of settlement and it was originally used in contrast to aboriginal forest dwellers and other communities that “were regarded as *mlechchha* – those outside the social pale of caste society” (65). While the latter is a pejorative term, it serves as an important reminder that not everyone in pre-colonial India was subject to the taxonomies of caste – another point conveniently ignored by the early Orientalists.

There are obviously strong points of overlap between *jati* and *varna*, particularly around the issue of professional occupation. As mentioned above, occupation is an important aspect of defining a community’s *jati* identity, but it also tends to be emphasized – perhaps even overemphasized – in English translations of *varna* from the Orientalist era to the present. The following is Thapar’s translation for the *chaturvarnic* allegory of the
“Purusa-Sukta”: “priests (Brahmins); “warrior aristocrats” (Kshatriyas); “cultivators and traders” (Vaishya); and one “who labours for others” (Shudras)” (63). Despite this shared rhetoric of occupational identity, the concepts of varna and jati are not synonymous. Occupation is merely one of the aspects by which the communal identity of a jati is defined. By contrast, the varnic significance of occupation relates to a symbolic and hierarchical notion of “ritual status” (Thapar 62). According to the chaturvarnic symbolism of the “Purusa-Sukta” hymn, the Brahmin varna is the group with the highest ritual status, but this sense of privilege derives from more than the dictates of the hymn. Historically, in the performative context of Vedic ritual practice, the privileges of varna were determined by additional factors of literacy, perceptions of purity, and interpersonal space.

According to Thapar, Vedic rituals required the presence of a Brahmin to officiate as the “priest”, and this involved the task of consulting the liturgy provided in Sanskrit texts. This level of literacy and textual access was the exclusive privilege of Brahmins and the males in particular. This sense of privilege did not grant a Brahmin the theocratic right to rule over others, but it did make the non-Brahmin jatis dependent on them whenever rituals such as the horse sacrifice (yajna) as well as ceremonies of royal legitimation and marriage had to be performed. As will be shown below, this sense of dependency was particularly strong for kings and other Kshatriya figures during the Vedic period.

Varna was also used as a marker of purity, but despite the literal translation of varna as “colour”, it did not necessarily carry the significance of racial purity, or at least not in the way that most colonial Europeans and contemporary North Americans have understood race. ⁸ As Thapar points out, there is a “paucity of specific descriptions” for differences in

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⁸ The literal translation of varna as “colour” has led some colonial as well as postcolonial scholars to interpret chaturvarna as a hierarchical system of racial difference. In the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century, this misinterpretation was most notably exploited by the anthropologist H. H. Risley as part of a massive ethnological project to classify so-called Aryan and Dravidian differences throughout India. Like Jones, Risley interpreted the caste system as the foundations of Indian civilization, but he also envisioned the latter as “the ideal laboratory” for an imagined global struggle between light and dark-skinned races (Dirks 213-214). As Dorothy M. Figueira discusses in Aryans, Jews, Brahmins, such theories of varna-as-race gained continuity and validation through European discourses of Aryanism, and they were re-affirmed by anti-colonial Indian nationalists and modern Hindu revivalists in the late colonial period.
skin pigmentation within the Vedic corpus (12). Instead, it appears that the referent of “colour” was taken symbolically as a marker of quality – the quality of one’s ritual status – and this is echoed in Forster and Rao with few, if any signs, of racialist rhetoric. By this definition, the Vedic concept of varna came to serve as a measurement of one’s ritual status according to a graded scale of purity and pollution. Thapar explains, “[r]itual status meant observing rules of purity and pollution, where the brahman was regarded as the purest and the others in descending order down to the most impure, who was the untouchable” (66). Though unmentioned in the “Purusa-Sukta”, the figure of the “untouchable” would constitute a fifth category outside the chaturvarna scheme – that is, arguably, the one without ritual status and therefore without colour (avarna).  

In addition to the presence of the Brahmin, another important ingredient in Vedic rituals was the use of fire as a central medium and marker of ritual space as well as varnic order. As Thapar points out, fire was “[s]ought to be the purest of the five elements” of nature and it was treated symbolically as “the appropriate intermediary between gods and men” (128). As the highest figure of ritual authority, the Brahmin would doubly justify his varnic position as the purest of all human participants through his spatial proximity to the fire. If the fire represented the focal point of the ritual, then the priest would serve as the secondary medium of communication between the fire and the other less pure varnic individuals – especially the king in his role as Kshatriya. As acts of performance, such Vedic rituals came to serve as a theatre of power, where the Kshatriya found himself momentarily displaced by Brahminical authority as well as spatially distanced from the

Interestingly, these ideas also traveled continents and historical contexts to be further exploited by Afrocentricists like the historian Ishakamusa Barashango and the hip-hop artist Rass Kass.

9 We have thus far seen two terms of cultural exclusion: foreigner (mleccha) and “untouchable” (avarna). In some cases, these terms are interchangeable, but their differences are significant: the “untouchable” is a marginalized member of the caste system, whereas the mleccha might refer to anyone outside of the system – i.e., an aboriginal Adivasi community or even the British colonials. It should also be noted that “untouchable” is currently viewed by Dalits as an offensive term. I have tried to use it with quotation marks whenever possible.
altar of the absolute pure.\textsuperscript{10} It is also significant that the audience for these rituals were restricted to the \textit{dwija} – the upper-three, “twice-born” \textit{varna} (i.e., Brahmins, \textit{Kshatriya} and \textit{Vaishya})\textsuperscript{11}. The exclusion of the \textit{Shudras} and other \textit{avarnic} groups would doubly reinforce their ritual status as the least pure and therefore most polluted subjects.

Analogous forms of ritual logic are central to the discussion of literary Indianness in this dissertation, though with variations. In each case, the Vedic concept of \textit{varna}-as-ritual status is alluded to but also revised in ways that are distinctive to the action of the novel and its allegorical vision of Indianness. In \textit{Passage}, the Gokul Ashtami festival is treated symbolically as a “Circle” of \textit{varni} order, where all individuals and groups are spatially organized in relation to the temple and its sites of ritual purity. There is less of an emphasis on purity and pollution in \textit{Serpent}, but ritual is nevertheless central to the reading of two events in the novel: the \textit{Gandharva} marriage ceremony of Rama and Savithri; and more importantly, the public spectacle of Queen Elizabeth II’s 1953 coronation. These rituals are narrated as symbols of Indianness and also as allegories for Brahmin-\textit{Kshatriya} relationships; the latter is also subject to gendered and heterosexist power dynamics (i.e., the union of a Brahmin man and \textit{Kshatriya} woman). The case of Roy’s counter-Indutva narrative is unique because it avoids the rhetoric of \textit{varna}; Brahmins are mentioned in the novel, but the primary focus is on Syrian Christians. Nevertheless, the discourse of pollution is central to Roy’s critique of caste. Caste is also represented in \textit{Small Things} through customary gestures and spatial differences between “Touchable” and “Untouchable” characters.

The representation of caste in Indutva fiction is further subject to rhetorical as well as performative modes of translation, deriving from the dynamic relationship of \textit{jati} and \textit{varna} in pre-colonial Hindu traditions. For example, in Forster, the occupational

\textsuperscript{10} This reversal of power is highlighted in Thapar’s descriptions: “There was now both a competition and an interweaving of the authority of the raja [king], the one who wielded power, and that of the brahman, the one who legitimized his power through ritual – a competition in which the brahman eventually emerged as the one with the highest ritual status” (120).

\textsuperscript{11} As Thapar notes, “the more spectacular rituals attracted patronage, as they had a public function, and only the upper castes could participate” (128).
identities of various *jati* groups symbolically undergo translation into *varnic* forms through the means of various rituals that take place in the Gokul Ashtami festival: the monarchical Rajah is suddenly re-casted as a *Kshatriya*; the assembly of devotees in the Mau temple perform as *Vaishyas*; and the Sweepers carry the significance of *Shudras* (though they could also be interpreted as Dalits or “Untouchables”). In *The Serpent and the Rope*, Savithri, a Rathor princess by birth and therefore *jati*, is similarly translated as a *Kshatriya*. The symbolic logic of *chaturvarna* is further extended to the geographic translation of north India as a *Kshatriya* space, south India as Brahminical and the mercantile city of Bombay as *Vaishya*. The *varna-jati* dynamic is also supplemented in *Rao* with a second set of translations where the Brahmin/non-Brahmin distinction further signifies a *guru-shishya* or teacher-disciple relationship; there are a few signs of this in *Forster* as well. In both novels, the ritual authority of the Brahmin – Professor Narayan Godbole in *Passage* and Ramaswamy in *Serpent* – is redefined as a form of pedagogical authority and this too is presented as a trope of Indianness.

Although the absence of *varnic* rhetoric in *Small Things* voids the possibility of similar translations, I argue that Roy’s narrative presents a dual-rhetoric on caste where characters are identified according to their *jati* as well as their status as either “Touchable” or “Untouchable” subjects. This system of “Un/Touchability” is presented partly as a fictional concept. However, unlike Forster, Rao, or anyone of the Orientalist tradition, Roy imagines this system strategically for the rhetorical purposes of enabling a larger critique of civilizational Indianness. Thus, by engaging caste through a dual-rhetoric, *The God of Small Things* enables a counter-Indutva allegory, critically dismantling and revising the system of tropes that are otherwise characteristic of Forster and Rao as well as both colonial Orientalism and anti-colonial Indian thought.

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12 The backslash in “Un/Touchability” or “Un/Touchable” emphasizes a dynamic relationship between Touchable and Untouchable positions of caste subjectivity within Roy’s novel. The rhetoric of the novel implies that the two positions can never be spoken of in themselves or with self-enclosed meanings.
1.3 Caste Subjectivity and Sanskritization

It is clearly problematic for readers of Indutva fiction to critically analyze the issue of caste without taking in the nuances of varna and jati, let alone conflating both under the Anglophone sign of “caste”.\textsuperscript{13} I argue this despite the fact that the words “varna” and “jati” never actually appear in the novels of Forster, Rao, and Roy. Nevertheless, the definitions of these terms as well as the complexity of their conceptual and highly dynamic relationship are integral to reading both caste in itself as well as a trope of Indianness in these novels. As discussed below, this dynamism registers at the level of rhetoric, but also of power.

In his discussion of caste and postcolonial literature in \textit{Flesh and Fish Blood}, S. Shankar argues that \textit{jati} is the rhetorical mode that most Hindus and other South Asian religious communities tend to use when planning marriages, sharing food, and identifying themselves to strangers (32). This renders \textit{jati} as a form of vernacular rhetoric and it arguably “carries more importance than varna” in everyday South Asian life (32). In literary contexts, the shared rhetoric of \textit{jati} thus signifies a realist mode. Yet, when forms of caste representation undergo dual or multiple sets of rhetorical translation, the narrative introduces a non-realist and highly allegorical discourse of caste, as in the case of Forster, Rao, and Roy’s novels.\textsuperscript{14} Again, the foregrounding of \textit{varna} over \textit{jati} as a trope of civilizational Indianness in Forster and Rao betrays the traces and influences of an Orientalist style, but the ritual logic and dual-rhetoric of caste draws equally, if not more, on theories of caste as a system of subject-production within both pre-colonial and vernacular contexts. This system applies as much to the theme of Indianness in Forster and Rao as it does to Roy’s non-\textit{varnic}, counter-Indutva critique. To explore this further,

\textsuperscript{13} As both Dirks and Inden point out, the English term “caste” derives from the Portuguese “\textit{casta}” (Dirks 19 and Inden 2000 57). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the original meaning of the latter term is “pure or unmixed (stock or breed)”.

\textsuperscript{14} In the case of Roy, her fictional rhetoric of Un-/Touchability further qualifies as an example of what Chelva Kanaganayakam theorizes as “counter-realism” because the discourse of caste here affords not only a non-realist and allegorical reading, but it also “acknowledges its own artifice” and “parade[s] the constructedness” of a world based on an Indutva style of thought (2000 674).
I offer a theoretical frame for interpreting varna and jati through a composite of pre-colonial, post-structuralist, and anthropological perspectives on caste, subjectivity, and the centripetal dynamics of Sanskritization.

As Thapar argues, varna relates to jati as a discursive form of “social legitimation” that was “imposed on pre-Vedic societies that may have been familiar with notions of jati” (65). The concept of jati is theoretically a priori to varna and the rhetoric of varna is otherwise meaningless in itself. Varna thus provides the means by which a jati community is inscribed with a position of ritual status; the notion of jati as “sub-caste” has no bearing within this scheme.

It is valuable to remember that the relationship between jati and varna is dynamic, not static. For the purpose of my own understanding and research in this dissertation, I have created a pseudo-Cartesian grid to map out this dynamic:

*Figure 1.*

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>+ Pole of Absolute Purity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brahmin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kshatriya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quadrant of the twice-born (dwija)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaishya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jati</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shudra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Untouchable (avarna)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Pole of Absolute Pollution</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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The difference between one jati and another can be located horizontally along the x-axis. As a result, there is room for an innumerable variety of jati identities in this grid, and the horizontality of the x-axis allows for the possibility of some measure of equality among them. The varnic differences between these jati can be similarly pinpointed along the vertical, and therefore hierarchical, dimensions of the y-axis with its grade scale of purity.
and pollution.\textsuperscript{15} By coordinating a point between the x- and y-axes, one can determine the ritual status of a \textit{jati} group. Thus, as the grid illustrates, it does not always matter which \textit{jati} an individual is born into. The privileges of the \textit{jati} are largely determined by where the community is located on the y-axis of \textit{varnic} order.

The dynamic interplay of \textit{jati} and \textit{varna} on this grid also helps to illustrate the production of caste as a form of \textit{subjectivity}. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, theorists of subjectivity have defined this concept generally as “the experience of the lived multiplicity of positionings” (Blackman, Cromby, Hook, Papadopolous, and Walkerdine 6). In the context of Indutva fiction, a similar sense of multiplicity is highlighted in the dynamics of \textit{jati} and \textit{varna}. As a mode of subjectivity, caste is also “produced through the plays of power/knowledge” (6). A conceptual emphasis on “production” is important here as a reminder that caste is indeed produced through a process involving the use of “discursive practices and technologies” (6). Such practices and technologies might include Vedic acts of ritual translation, the authorization of \textit{Manu}’s law, or the exercise of colonial jurisprudence based on Jones’ translation, among others. Furthermore, as with other forms of subject-production, the subjectivities of caste are predicated on acts of recognition.\textsuperscript{16} For example, when Forster introduces the Sweepers to the Gokul Ashtami festival episode, their translation into \textit{varnic} subjects is not of their own agency. The narrative suggests that they are recognized as such by their upper-caste observers, and similar acts of recognition take place in the production of non-Brahmin and Untouchable subjectivities within the novels of both Rao and Roy respectively.

\textsuperscript{15} The grid draws the y-axis in such a way that isolates the “twice-born” \textit{varna}, but the same line could be re-drawn to demarcate a Brahmin-Kshatriya sense of alliance or simply the dominance of the Brahmin over all \textit{varnic} and \textit{avarnic} groups. In any case, it does not really matter where the line is exactly drawn, so long as the verticality of the y-axis is maintained as a means of highlighting \textit{varna} as a line of hierarchy, inequality, and power.

\textsuperscript{16} Foucault emphasizes the importance of recognition in his essay, “The Subject and Power”: “This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must \textit{recognize} and which others have to recognize in him” (my italics 781).
Ultimately, the rationale for applying a post-structuralist concept of subjectivity to these readings of Indutva fiction is for the sake of foregrounding the issue of power and lost agency in the narrated experience of caste, particularly within the symbolic realms of varna. Both jati and varna are forms of socially constructed identity, but the loss of agency through varnic subjectivity is of greater significance for this study. This loss registers at the level of social and economic marginalization, but as is evidenced in the readings of Forster, Rao, and Roy, it also registers at an ontological level, where individuals and communities are denied the power to self-identify and practice non-varnic modes of being.

With that said, there is a point within this analysis where the approach departs from post-structuralist theories of subjectivity. This is because while the representation of disempowered, lower-caste characters like the Sweepers in Passage and the Paravans in Small Things is integral to this study, it is mostly through a focus on the uniqueness of the worldviews held by upper-caste characters that the tropological relationship between caste, religion, metaphysics, and Indianness is revealed within Indutva fiction. Furthermore, unlike in most post-structuralist theories of subjectivity, the sense of power and positioning for Brahmin and Touchable characters is self-produced within this literary tradition. For example, when Forster depicts Godbole’s translation from a member of the “Deccani Brahman” jati to a varnic figure of Brahminical ritual authority, it is a translation that takes place out of his own agency and mostly so because of his religio-philosophical beliefs; his act of self-subject-production is thus doubly significant as an act of duty or dharma (61). As a Brahmin, Godbole’s dharma involves a position of power, but the narrator suggests that Godbole assumes this position for reasons that are neither personal nor individualistic. Rather, the fulfillment of Godbole’s dharma is motivated by an impersonal desire, one that intends to provoke all individuals and groups to fill their own varnic duties within the Gokul Ashtami and with a comparable degree of impersonality. This conceit of varna, dharma, and impersonal desire is echoed by Rama in The Serpent and the Rope, though in ways that are more explicit on its metaphysical significance. For Rama, when all members of a society fulfill their dharma (as defined by their varnic subjectivity), a sense of impersonal oneness pervades throughout the whole of society. According to the pre-colonial tradition of Advaita Vedanta philosophy, this
sense of non-dualist oneness is *brahman*, the “ultimate reality” of the universe (Sharma 2000 1). By evoking this metaphysical ideal, a society based on *varnic* order and *dharmic* fulfillment doubly evokes *rta*, a state of “cosmic order” (104). The emphasis on the impersonal qualities of duty, oneness and cosmic order is central to the narrative of imagined Indianness in both Forster’s Gokul Ashtami and Rao’s post-imperial coronation ceremony, and thus its rhetoric serves as a key trope of Indianness within both novels.

The rhetorical marriage of Brahminical, *varnic* subjectivity and Vedantic, *brahman*-ical oneness complicates the analysis of power within Indutva fiction because they challenge the reader to deal with the politics of inequality within a worldview of religious and philosophical idealism. For Godbole and Rama, the recognition of *varna* on the bodies of others is not said to be driven by their own selfishly personal or materialist desires for Brahminical privilege. Rather, their motivation comes from an impersonal belief in *brahman* as a metaphysical principle, a universal truth, and therefore a distinctively “Indian” knowledge-tradition. While one would like to argue that the rhetoric of the impersonal is probably a disguise for an otherwise personal or individual desire for power, the fact is that there is no evidence of Godbole or Rama’s desire to deceive others in that or other such ways. That said, the deceptive use of an impersonal rhetoric is indeed evident in Roy’s characterization of Comrade Pillai and the other Touchable characters in *The God of Small Things*. For the latter, the rhetoric of the impersonal is the means by which personal desire is masked and for Roy, this relationship is doubly significant for the tropology of Indianness within her counter-Indutva critique.

The representation of Brahminical power as religious, metaphysical, and impersonal is further complicated in Indutva fiction by the presence of what Mikhail Bakhtin conceptualizes as the “centripetal” forces of “verbal-ideological centralization” (1981 277). The power dynamic is not treated in these novels simply as a vertical and top-heavy system of the upper castes ruling over the lower castes. Rather, it is of the former “pulling” the latter to translate and cohere their actions with the official discourses of Indianness: *varna, dharma*, and *brahman* in both *Passage* and *Serpent*; and *Big Things*, *Big Gods*, *History*, and the *Love Laws* in *Small Things*. These sets of official discourses
carry a greater sense of power than that which is exercised by any upper-caste individual or group depicted in the novels.

Bakhtin’s concept of centripetality has a theoretical analogue in M. N. Srinivas’ concept of Sanskritization: i.e., “the adoption of new customs and habits, but also exposure to new ideas and values which have found frequent expression in the vast body of Sanskrit literature, sacred as well as secular” (1970 48). Thus, where Bakhtin speaks generally of the power of “official discourses,” Srinivas’ concept is culturally specific in pinpointing Sanskrit as the language of power within pre-colonial as well as modern contexts of Hinduism, vernacular culture, and as this dissertation will demonstrate, Anglophone Indutva fiction.

In anthropology and other social sciences, the concept of Sanskritization is often used as a tool for theorizing the varnic mobility of a non-Brahmin jati community. By absorbing Sanskritic elements, a jati acquires a more privileged status within the chaturvarnic hierarchy. Such acts of Sanskritization might also be interpreted as forms of non-Brahmin or lower-caste empowerment. To return to the grid in Figure I., these acts would enable a jati to shift positions on the y-axis of varna. The horizontality of the x-axis thus allows for tracking the varnic history of that jati community, foregrounding the notion that caste is indeed historical, not timeless or eternally ancient. The mapping of this dynamic is doubly informed by Srinivas’ theoretical interventions for challenging the Orientalist grand narrative of ancient Brahminical supremacy and varnic, civilizational stasis as essences of Indianness. He writes, “the caste system always permitted a certain amount of mobility. This is why mutual position tends to be vague in the middle regions of the hierarchy and not at either extremity” (8).

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Srinivas’ concept is his rhetorical decision to coin it as “Sanskritization” rather than “Brahminization”, despite its strong focus on caste and varnic mobility. As he explains in “A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization,” while acts of Sanskritization are successful in enabling the recognition and elevation of a non-Brahmin jati to a higher varnic subjectivity, a Sanskritized jati will almost never be recognized as “Brahmin”. There is clearly a limit to Sanskritization as a process of varnic
mobility and this is conversely true for Dalits, as acts of Sanskritization almost never lead to new and empowering forms of varnic status (via Brahminical recognition). Such limits are similarly highlighted in the perennial forms of Untouchable subjectivity that the Paravans and other lower-caste groups endure despite their attempts at mobility and liberation from Touchable oppression in The God of Small Things. However, in both cases of Srinivas’ studies and Roy’s fiction, these limits are reinforced through the centripetal power of official discourses, rather than solely through the repressive actions of upper-caste subjects.

1.4 Neo-Vedanta and the Hegelian Rhetoric of “History”

As a key trope of Indianness, the non-dualist concept of brahman is central to the worldviews of Forster and Rao’s fictional Brahmins. This concept is invoked as the metaphysical grounds for justifying varnic order and the impersonal nature of dharma, and thus it is represented as an object of centripetality within these novels. This metaphysical emphasis is particularly strong in Serpent as Rama is much more explicit than Godbole in identifying himself as a “Vedantin”; it is also significant that Rao himself studied Vedanta under a guru in south India (Swami Atmananda) and was then employed as a professor to teach Vedanta philosophy (rather than literature or creative writing) at the University of Texas-Austin. However, the background research of this dissertation project finds that such invocations of “Vedanta” in Indutva fiction are less grounded in pre-colonial Advaita Vedanta philosophy than in Neo-Vedanta, a loosely organized Hindu revivalist movement that developed throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.\(^{17}\) Neo-Vedanta is also partly an intellectual, anti-colonial response to the Indophobia of Western thinkers like Mill, Macaulay, and most importantly for this project, G. W. F. Hegel. The emergence of Neo-Vedantic thought

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\(^{17}\) This discussion of Neo-Vedanta is strongly informed by Richard King’s critical insights of this tradition and its relationship to both pre-colonial Advaita Vedanta as well as modern South Asian thought in Orientalism and Religion.
coincided with the Indian independence movement and thus one cannot discuss its philosophy without being aware of its political contexts.

As Partha Chatterjee argues in *The Nation and its Fragments*, the central paradigm of Indian anti-colonial nationalist thought was an imagined spatial bifurcation of the outer “Material” domain and its inner “Spiritual” counterpart. He explains,

> The material is the domain of the “outside,” of the economy and of statecraft, of science and technology, a domain where the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed. In this domain, then, Western superiority had to be acknowledged and its accomplishments carefully studied and replicated. The spiritual, on the other hand, is an “inner” domain bearing the “essential” marks of cultural identity. The greater one’s success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater need to preserve the distinctness of one’s spiritual culture. (6)

Despite an anti-colonial imperative, the inside/outside and Materialist/Spiritualist paradigm of nationalist Indian thought inherits the Orientalist style of mapping civilizational essences and differences along dualist lines (i.e., of East and West). Such traces are present in Neo-Vedantic discourse as well, but the concept of India’s civilizational essence in Neo-Vedanta is presented with a twist on colonial Orientalism’s grand Indological narrative. For the latter, caste is a key essence of Indian civilization, but for Neo-Vedanta, the essence is *brahman*. *Brahman* is thus redefined as a metaphysical awareness of universal oneness, one that characterizes Indianness as a civilizational ideal. This awareness as such is proposed as the point on which India, if not all of the East, distinguishes itself from Western modernity and justifies its sovereign right to postcolonial self-governance. This essentialism of *brahman*-ical India is affirmed by writers of varying intellectual and ideological backgrounds: the art historian and polymath Ananda K. Coomaraswamy; the secular and non-violent Mahatma Gandhi; the Hindutva extremist M. S. Golwalkar; the philosopher and first President of India, S. Radhakrishnan; and the *guru* of the Ramakrishna *Math*, Swami Vivekananda.
While metaphysics is the primary focus of Neo-Vedanta, its early proponents were equally engaged with Orientalist as well as Indophobic critiques of caste, its hierarchies and systems of oppression, but most importantly its political significance as a Brahminical form of theocracy and therefore “the principal impediment to modernity” in South Asia (Dirks 253). This acknowledgement of both Orientalist and Indophobic thought is not exclusive to Neo-Vedanta; it traces back at least as far back to Ram Mohan Roy, the early nineteenth-century founder of the Hindu reformist Brahma Samaj organization. Sumit Sarkar cites Roy’s writings on “jatibheda” and his critiques of caste inequity as “the root of all disunions” for Indians under colonial rule (2006 365). In the context of anti-colonial nationalist thought, this and other such critiques of casteism signify an affirmation of Western democracy and its ascendency in the realm of the Material domain. However, as Chatterjee argues, the affirmation of the Material can only be secured through a parallel engagement with the Spiritual. Thus, in the case of Neo-Vedanta discourse, the Materialist critique is paradoxically coupled with a re-appropriation of varna. To some extent, this paradox challenges the singular Orientalist rhetoric of “caste” and its ignorance of the jati-varna dynamic. Yet, this dynamic is also revised through Neo-Vedanta’s discourse of varnashramadharma. The latter is a modern neologism of varna, ashrama (stages of life), and dharma, and it is used to claim equality among all varnic subjects. However, there is some oscillation on the historicity of varnashramadharma when its ideals are presented as either part of a revisionist approach to Vedic Hinduism or a prophecy on the postcolonial future of modern India. Writers like Coomaraswamy, Gandhi, Golwalkar, and Vivekananda have also extended this prophecy of India’s postcolonial varnic modernity as a civilizational challenge to various

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18 An important example of Indophobia as a critique of caste and Indian civilization is to be found in James Mill’s The History of British India (1817). He writes, “by the division of the people into castes, and the prejudices which the detestable views of the Brahmens [sic] raised to separate them, a more degrading and pernicious system of subordination was established among the Hindus, or at any rate the vices of that system were carried to a more destructive height, than among any other people” (452). For these reasons, Mill famously evaluated India as a “rude” civilization (438).
Occidental competitors: Marxism, socialism, and communism. The writings of Coomaraswamy are of particular importance for this dissertation because Rama alludes to them explicitly in *The Serpent and the Rope*. These allusions are presented as part of a prologue to Rama’s reconstruction of the Queen’s coronation, prophesying the latter as a historical moment of Indianness reborn in the West.

While the tropologies of *varna, dharma, brahman* and civilizational Indianness in Passage and Serpent bear strong traces of Neo-Vedantic influence, there are some also some critical differences between Neo-Vedanta and literary Indutvva. For the latter, *varna* is integral to their narratives of non-dualist, *brahman*-ical oneness, but it is never presented as a system of equality. Forster’s Gokul Ashtami is a scene where all communities are included to participate in the rituals, but it is also one where all are subject to their own respective place within a *varnic* hierarchy of purity and pollution. In Serpent, Rama idealizes *varnic* inequality through a gendered caste-ting of Brahmins as male and *Kshatriyas* as female. One might argue that these modern narratives of *varnic* inequality reveal the shortcomings of both Forster and Rao’s attempts to represent Neo-Vedanta and *varnashramadharma* accurately within Anglophone Indutvva fiction. The rebuttal of this dissertation is that both Passage and Serpent are perhaps much more accurate and honest because they reveal the limits of Neo-Vedantic rhetoric on the

19 This discourse of India’s civilizational challenge to the West is presented differently by each of the aforementioned figures of Neo-Vedantic thought. In *Bunch of Thoughts*, Golwalkar dismisses socialism as racially foreign to Indian civilization: “It is not in our blood and tradition. It has absolutely nothing to do with the traditions and ideal of thousand years of our national life” (193). In the essay “Modern India,” Vivekananda translates “Socialism, Anarchism, [and] Nihilism” within a global *varnic* worldview where they are provincialized as non-Brahmin “sects” and therefore prophesied as inferior expressions of *Shudra* modernity: “a time will come when the Shudras of every country, with their inborn Shudra nature and habits — not becoming in essence Vaishya or Kshatriya, but remaining as Shudras — will gain absolute supremacy in every society” (468-69). In a similarly prophetic mode, Gandhi’s “Introduction to Varnayavastha” authenticates *varnashramadharma* as “true socialism” — that is, truer than its Western counterpart (67). He also reverses Vivekananda’s *varnic* chauvinism and praises the *Shudra* as the ideal subject: “Indeed, if one may have preference, the Shudra, who performs body-labour in a spirit of service and duty, who has nothing to call his own and who has no desire for ownership, is worthy of the world’s homage; he is the lord of all because he is the greatest servant. The dutiful Shudra will, of course, repudiate any such claim, but the gods will shower their choicest blessings on him. One may not say this of the proletariat of the present day. They certainly own nothing, but I expect they covet ownership” (66-67).
subject of equality and in ways that are more seductively hidden by historical figures, intellectuals, and activists like Coomaraswamy, Gandhi, Golwalkar, and Vivekananda.

These limits are also significant for the history of scholarship on both Forster and Rao. Scholarly readers of Passage and Serpent have generally ignored issues of caste and Sanskritization, especially while attempting to engage the novels’ allusions to Neo-Vedantic metaphysics. One reason for this oversight is that many such readers view a metaphysical and highly monistic engagement with Indianness as enabling a critique of the West and its grand narratives of modernity: rationality, nationalism, capitalism, Marxism, and even aesthetic forms of beauty (in contrast to the sublime). These critiques are enunciated by both Forster and Rao, but it is very interesting that both authors trope modernity through the rhetoric of History, thus signifying an engagement with Hegel and specifically his Indophobic evaluations of “Hindoo” civilization in The Philosophy of History.

Hegel’s grand conclusion is that Hinduism (and therefore Indian civilization by extension) is “incapable of writing History” (162). His reasons are two-fold. Hinduism’s incapability is due to social obstacles posed by its eternally ancient, theocratic, Brahminical supremacy. While the rhetoric of the latter places Hegel firmly within the historical continuum of both colonial Orientalism and Indophobia, the case of Hegel is unique. He was of German descent and therefore technically not an agent of British imperialism. More importantly, his arguments involve an engagement with Vedanta well before its modern reincarnation as Neo-Vedanta. He writes,

Brahm itself is the Substantial Unity of All. The highest religious position of man, therefore is, being exalted to Brahm. If a Brahmin is asked what Brahm is, he

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20 In Devotional Poetics and the Indian Sublime, Vijay Mishra notes that Hegel developed his understanding of Vedanta through Orientalist literature: i.e., “German and English translations of Sanskrit texts (especially those of William Jones, Henry Thomas Colebrook, Franz Bopp, and Friedrich von Schlegel) as well as studies of India by J. A. Dubois, James Mill, and W. von Humboldt” (10). It is worth noting that Vivekananda studied Hegel as part of his education before committing himself to Neo-Vedanta. This was also before he changed his name from Narendranath Datta: “According to Swami Saradananda, during his College days Naren studied Western philosophy, familiarizing himself with the thoughts of Descartes, Hume, Kant, Fichte, Spinoza, Hegel…” (Dhar 53).
answers: When I fall back within myself, and close all external senses, and say om to myself, that is Brahm. Abstract unity with God is realized in this abstraction from humanity. An abstraction of this kind may in some cases leave everything else unchanged, as does devotional feeling, momentarily excited. But among the Hindoos it holds a negative position towards all that is concrete; and the highest state is supposed to be this exaltation, by which the Hindoo raises himself to deity. (148)

For Hegel, the pursuit of brahman frustrates the possibility of historical writing and memory because “History requires Understanding – the power of looking at an object in an independent objective light, and comprehending it in its rational connection with other objects” (162). In Hegel’s view, History is oriented towards reason, objectivity, and a cognitive understanding of difference. It is therefore the opposite of a metaphysical tradition that privileges a mystical, subjective, and monistic conception of ultimate reality. As a result, by privileging brahman as the “sovereign” principle of “Hindoo” civilization, India is not only “incapable of writing History”, but its civilization is also collectively trapped in “a state of dreaming” (162), one which is doubly reinforced by caste differences: “The Brahmins, in virtue of their birth, are already in possession of the Divine. The distinction of castes involves, therefore, a distinction between present deities and mere limited mortals” (148).

The counter-Hegelian response of Neo-Vedantic philosophers like Coomaraswamy, Gandhi, and Vivekananda is equally grand, though implicitly suggested: to summarize, if India is incapable of writing History, then let it be said that Western modernity is incapable of knowing brahman. This response is also echoed in Passage and Serpent, though with variations. For the former, the Gokul Ashtami festival is characterized as a brahman-ical space, yet one that deploys heterotopic devices to alienate both British colonials and Indian nationalists as equal agents of History. The festival is thus presented as an Indutva symbol of counter-modernity, and the world outside is actually referred to

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21 In his “Introduction,” Hegel conceptualizes “Reason” as “the Sovereign of the World” and “History” as “the simple conception of Reason” (9).
as the “dream” – a reversal of Hegel’s Indophobic critique (270). In *Serpent*, Rama’s meditations on postcolonial Nehruvian India suggest that a modernized India is incapable of *brahman*. However, he turns to the West as a site of Indutva awakening, emphasizing India’s civilizational essence as an abstraction rather than its political geography.

In all three traditions – Hegelianism, Neo-Vedanta, and Indutva fiction – “History” is the trope of Western modernity. However, in the context of this dissertation, it functions doubly as a trope of Indianness. History refers to the West, but it also evokes the Orientalist style of viewing the West through its contrast with the East and vice-versa. As a result, the central tension within both Neo-Vedanta and the Indutva fictions of Forster and Rao is not of East and West, but of “History” and “Indianness” in contest over the Spiritual domain. It is also significant that Hegel’s philosophy of History is allegorized as both a “World-Spirit” and a three-act play (10). There are similar characteristics at work in Forster and Rao’s Indutva narrative. The Gokul Ashtami festival in *Passage* is literally a performative space, but symbolically one that stages the agents of colonialism and nationalism allegorically within a theatrical framework. And just as Hegel ends his three-act play of History in Europe, Rao does the same by pointing to Britain and the Queen’s coronation as a Hegelian “end of History” (103), albeit with a revisionist approach as the coronation is allegorized as a rebirth of the “spirit” of Indianness in the West.

There are no similar references to Neo-Vedanta or Hegel in *The God of Small Things*, but many of the tropes and dynamics discussed above are echoed as well as rewritten for the strategies of Roy’s counter-Indutva critique. Her disengagement with the idealism of *brahman*-ical oneness and *varnashramadharma* enables a strong focus on the violence and horror that is otherwise absent in the Indutva narratives of Forster and Rao. This focus also goes beyond the issue of individual or community caste relations. The latter is the starting point for the reading presented in this dissertation, but it leads to an engagement with larger, abstract and highly allegorical discourses of civilizational Indianness: the Love Laws on caste and Un-/Touchability; the Big, impersonal God of all Things; and the anthropomorphic, yet non-Hegelian, spirit of History. These relationships between caste and civilizational discourse, the Small and the Big, are also woven together through signs of centripetality and dynamics that echo, but also revise, Srinivas’ concept
of Sanskritization. As a result, this reading of *The God of Small Things* reveals a set of metaphysical and allegorical aspects that have not been discussed previously in the novel’s history of scholarly reception. One of the main reasons why these aspects have not been discussed as such is because few, if any, scholars have examined the novel critically as a grand narrative of civilizational Indianness in the ways that others have with *A Passage to India* and *The Serpent and the Rope*, let alone according to the tropologies presented in this dissertation.

1.5 Precedents and Debates

The representation of Indianness in the selected novels of Forster, Rao, and Roy is civilizational, casteist, metaphysical, and impersonal. It is also characterized by forms of Sanskritization and centripetality as well as allusions to the Hegelian discourse of “History.” Lastly, the representation of Indianness is tropological and allegorical, and the recurrence of these characteristics (with variation) is significant for framing these novels as part of a literary Indutva tradition.

Like Indology, Indutva fiction is discursively tied to colonial Orientalism and its legacies of essentializing the cultures of the South Asian subcontinent homogenously and trans-historically as aspects of a singular, caste-based civilization. This is not to suggest that the novels of Forster, Rao, and Roy are necessarily instruments of colonial or neo-colonial governance; rather, it is to draw attention to the weight of Orientalism’s discursive history. This sense of discursive weight is also evident in the historical case of anti-colonial Indian activism and modern Neo-Vedantic philosophy. Despite attempts to critically revise the grand narrative of India as a Brahmical theocracy, the reclamation of *varna* as a civilizational trope betrays the inheritance of an Orientalist style of thought – a style of imagining India in essentially varnic terms. This inheritance is also extended to Indutva fiction, particularly in the case of Forster and Rao. Thus, the readings presented in this dissertation call attention to what Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter Van Der Deer call the “postcolonial predicament” of knowing that one “cannot escape from a
history characterized by a particular discursive formation that can be called “orientalism” (2).

However, the postcolonial predicament of reading Indutva fiction critically is also compounded by the predicament of engaging pre-colonial histories of caste inequity; the Sanskritization and de-Sanskritization of non-Brahmin cultures; the rise of post-Vedic religious movements like Buddhism and bhakti; and the rise of vernacular bhasa languages and literary traditions (which include various forms of bhakti poetry). As a counter-Indutva narrative, The God of Small Things draws attention to its own set of pre-colonial predicaments and foregrounds it as a crucial supplement to postcolonial concerns. The novel addresses the history of colonialism and its legacies through forms of neo-liberal, global economics (i.e., the destructive power of the IMF and the World Bank), but its literal and allegorical representations of upper-caste, Touchable violence are framed within a larger historical context that exceeds and provincializes the temporal limits of colonial and postcolonial modernity.

The theoretical challenge of reading South Asian literature and wrestling with the politics of a similarly “bipolar” set of predicaments has been previously addressed by G. N. Devy in After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism (19). The focus of Devy’s work is on literary theory, and the problem of developing critical tools that adequately address the particular sensibilities of modern bhasa literature. Devy raises this problem as a “tripartite” crisis for bhasa scholars working against the dominance of “Sanskrit poetics” and “Western critical theories”, the Brahminical bias of the former and the Anglo-Euro-American imperialist legacies of the latter (19). As a step towards resolving this crisis, Devy argues that bhasa literary scholars should turn their attention towards bhasa texts in order to cultivate a theoretical practice that “gathers its main critical issues and themes from within the tradition of the literature it examines” (120). A radical vision of this project can be found in the “Nativism” movement sparked by the Marathi writer Bhalchandra Nemade. Nemade privileges “realism and a ‘writerly morality’ as criteria of critical judgment”, and his arguments also suggest an extremist rejection of Anglophone literary and theoretical traditions (192). Although S. Shankar is less antagonistic, he echoes the bhasa politics of Nemade and Devy when he categorizes
postcolonial theory as an Anglophone tradition and attributes the issue of language as a key factor on the lack of attention to casteism within postcolonial literary studies:

Literary postcolonial theory, with its more overt Anglophone preoccupations, registers this bias away from caste more fully than other disciplines. Since Anglophone texts themselves largely disregard caste, the obstacles to contemplating it within postcolonial literary criticism become especially difficult.

(28)

The project of this dissertation, with its focus on the tropes of Indianness, shares Shankar’s urgency for addressing casteism and its representations in literature, and it also voices a few critiques on the limits of postcolonial theory when engaging the politics of colonialism, Orientalism, and Western modernity within the context of Indianness. Yet, one of the presuppositions of this project is that casteism, Sanskritization and other related issues are integral to the selected works of Anglophone fiction, two of which (Passage and Small Things) have been met with critical acclaim, commercial success and academic canonicity; these issues are not the exclusive domain of bhasa Indian literatures. Similarly, while the theoretical framework of this project shares the tripartite, critical attitudes of both Devy and Nemade, this project inverts the privileged categories of Nativist studies. The focus is on reading Anglophone texts (albeit using critical tools derived from aspects of bhasa and Sanskrit literature in English translation) as well as allegorical, rather than realist, modes. Also, while my analysis of Indianness carries political significance, its objectives are critical rather than moralistic. This project offers a means of interrogating and deconstructing representations of Indianness within both grand narrative and counter-narrative forms, but it offers no conclusions on what is the right or ethical alternative to Indutva modes of identity, cultural representation, and styles of thought.

The focus on Indianness, its tropes and its allegories, within Anglophone colonial and postcolonial South Asian literature, is unique to this project, but it also has its precedents in scholarship on literary representations of “India”. Some of the most important studies on this broader topic are Sara Suleri’s The Rhetoric of English India (1992); Balachandra
Rajan’s *Under Western Eyes: India from Milton to Macaulay* (1999); Srinivas Aravamudan’s *Guru English: South Asian Religion in a Cosmopolitan Language* (2005); Priyamvada Gopal’s *The Indian English Novel: Nation, History and Narration* (2009); and Geetha Ganapathy-Doré’s *The Postcolonial Indian Novel in English* (2011). These studies share an interest in reading British and Anglophone South Asian fiction critically within a framework of textual history and postcolonial theorizing. Rajan’s primary focus is on early modern Western literature, both fictional and non-fictional, from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, and his work includes a focus on Hegel. By contrast, both Suleri and Aravamudan are engaged with colonial and postcolonial literatures. Suleri’s interests in gendered representations of India are echoed in my focus on caste as an object of identity politics, one that is doubly subject to allegory and other modes of aestheticization (i.e., the sublime). Aravamudan’s work is less focused on “India” than on religion and Hinduism in particular. His discussion of the “*guru*” as a figure of subjectivity and an agent in the modernization of Hinduism within both fictional and non-fictional literature relates strongly to my discussions of the Brahmin and the role of pedagogical authority in Forster and Rao. Finally, Gopal and Ganapathy-Doré’s overviews of the development of the Indian novel in English are relevant to this study of Indutva fiction as a novelistic, Anglophone tradition. However, the crucial point where my work departs from theirs as well as the others mentioned above is the specific focus on Indianess, rather than “India”: that is, on an essence, rather than a place; and on civilizational qualities, rather than national ones.22

The term “Indianness” has been used previously in other studies (including the aforementioned) as well as other literary contexts, but there has never been a sustained analysis of its significance as a concept, at least not with regards to fictional literature or the tropologies highlighted in this dissertation. However, there has been a case where the term has been the subject of controversy within literary circles, most notably in a debate...

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22 This body of scholarship is complemented by recent studies of caste and South Asian literature: S. Shankar’s *Flesh and Fish Blood: Postcolonialism, Translation, and the Vernacular* (2012); and Toral Jatin Gajarwala’s *Untouchable Fictions: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste* (2013). Like Shankar, Gajarwala’s primary focus is on vernacular literature, specifically in Hindi (Premchand and Renu), but there is also some discussion of Anglophone writers (Mulk Raj Anand and Arvind Adiga).
between the critic Meenakshi Mukherjee and the novelist Vikram Chandra. In “The Anxiety of Indianness: Our Novels in English” (1993), Mukherjee briefly defines Indianness according to a set of descriptors not unlike those outlined in this study. Using the example of R. K. Narayan’s novels, she writes: “Malgudi is Hindu upper-caste pan-India, resistant to change, eternal and immutable” (2608). She argues that this essentialist idea of Indianness is an exclusively Anglophone theme, one that has no relevance to bhasa literatures or their scholarly readers: “No one would write a doctoral dissertation on the Indianness of [a] Marathi novel” (2607). The rationale behind this dubious claim is a matter of audience and reception:

R. K. Narayan’s audience is spread far and wide, within India and outside, hence the need for an even-toned minimalistic representation that will not depend too much on the intricacies and contradictions in the culture and inflections of voice which only an insider can decipher (2608).

Mukherjee then argues that, for the late twentieth-century generation of novelists, Indianness is imagined as so for the sake of catering to Neo-Orientalist, marketplace consumers – a point developed more extensively by Graham Huggan in The Postcolonial Exotic (2001).

Chandra’s “The Cult of Authenticity” (2000) was published as a critical reflection on Mukherjee’s thesis after he was confronted by her at a book reading and accused of using Sanskrit terms in his novels “to signal Indianness in the West” (para 3). Drawing on a variety of sources from Bollywood culture to personal conversations, Chandra argues that Sanskrit concepts (such as kama or dharma) and literature (the Ramayana and the Mahabharata) are and never have been disassociated from everyday Indian life. He also points out a crucial problem that characterizes critics like Mukherjee and their “censorious rhetoric about correct Indianness” (para 20). By critiquing Anglophone, and mostly diasporic, Indian writers for selling fictional and highly marketable representations of Indianness, they presuppose that an authentic notion of Indianness exists in realist, vernacular literature.
I agree with Chandra’s latter’s point that it is deeply problematic to put vernacular literature on a pedestal of cultural authenticity, just as it is to do the reverse (as Salman Rushdie notoriously did in his introduction to the Mirrorwork anthology of Anglophone Indian writing). I also agree that everyday Indian life is rich with elements of Sanskrit discourse, just as Western life is with elements of classical Greek and Latin. However, Chandra fails to address the power relationship between Sanskrit and the bhasas, one that is doubly inscribed by dynamics of caste, a relationship that is otherwise foregrounded in this study of literary Indianness. As a result, he unknowingly casts himself as more of an apologist for Sanskritization than the Neo-Orientalism that he believes he has been accused of.

Having said that, while the politics of the literary marketplace are undeniably important, I think Mukherjee simplifies the problems of Anglophone Indianness by attributing it largely to Neo-Orientalist, consumerist desires. It is important to remember that, for Neo-Vedantins, the project of re-imagining Indianess as an embodiment of varnasramadharma was framed as an expression of religious and philosophical belief. Indianess was thus imagined not only as an idea, but it was prophesied as an ideal, albeit from the privileged perspectives of Brahminical Hindu subjectivities. Of the three novelists discussed in this dissertation, Rao is distinguished as the most philosophically and artistically committed to Neo-Vedanta; he is also the least commercially successful and the least read by contemporary audiences within and outside academia. It would indeed be interesting to explore his relationship with his publishers and the culture of reception for The Serpent and the Rope, but that is not the project of this dissertation. The theoretical approach here is primarily textual, literary, and discursive. I am interested in how The Serpent and the Rope speaks dialogically to parallel representations of

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23 Rushdie writes, “the prose writing – both fiction and nonfiction – created in this period [the fifty years of independence] by Indian writers working in English is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the eighteen “recognized” languages of India, the so-called “vernacular languages,” during the same time” (vii).

24 I began some of this work by establishing a brief correspondence with Rao’s publisher, John R. Murray of John Murray Publishers, who generously provided me with anecdotes and a file of the in-house reviews for Serpent prior to its publication.
Indianness in A Passage to India and The God of Small Things, and how our critical engagement with the tropes of civilization, caste, metaphysics, etc., is deepened by an engagement with pre-colonial and postcolonial histories of literature and intellectual thought. There are discursive aspects to the literary marketplace, but their significance is beyond the limits of this study.

The project of this study has undergone a series of evolutionary developments that informed the selection of its primary texts and the narrowing of its focus. It was initially proposed as an examination of the relationship between experimental poetics and alienation (particularly through the experience of exile) in postcolonial South Asian literature. Although my chief interests lay in the novels of Salman Rushdie, G. V. Desani, and Zulfikar Ghose as well as the poetry of Dilip Chitre and Arun Kolatkar, I began my research with Rao through the course of a paper for a graduate seminar led by Professor Chelva Kanaganayakam on religion, ritual and myth in postcolonial South Asian literature. The experience of writing this paper and the seminar as a whole introduced me to the theoretical dynamics of varna and jati and thus led to a critical shift where I became more interested with issues of caste than exile.

I re-encountered A Passage to India during the preparations for my special fields examinations and was awestruck by the Gokul Ashtami episode because of its engagement with pre-colonial bhakti and its religious, cultural, and literary traditions of popular worship and non-Brahmin, bhasa poetry. The term bhakti means “devotion” and it is often used by Hindu studies scholars as an umbrella term for various movements that emerged in South Asia during the eighth to the seventeenth centuries, beginning with the Tamil Alvar poets. As Vijay Mishra notes in Devotional Poetics and the Indian Sublime, bhakti or “devotional poetry signals a decisive break in Hinduism that occurred when a predominantly intellectual and ritualistic religion [i.e., Vedic Hinduism] shifted its religious practices to incorporate the concept of loving communion/union with a personal God” (5). Romila Thapar adds that this shift took place towards the end of the first

25 An important precedent for the study of alienation as a theme in postcolonial Indian fiction is Tabish Khair’s Babu Fictions: Alienation in Indian English Novels (2001).
millennium C.E. and that it signified a “reduction of the emphasis of the priest compared to his role in the sacrificial role of Vedic Brahminism” (318). I had been previously interested in bhakti poetry because of its strong and explicit influence on Chitre and Kolatkar (including their poems on alienation), and I was increasingly interested in exploring similar resonances in other works of postcolonial South Asian fiction. The Serpent and the Rope is rich with references to the Hindustani bhakti poet Mirabai and the Varkari poet Tukaram is no less integral to Forster’s Gokul Ashtami episode. The fact that the latter is set in a Marathi context spoke to me personally because my parents are from Maharashtra and I was raised to speak Marathi as well as practice similar forms of bhakti in our family’s religious practice; I had also written graduate papers and delivered conference presentations on Tukaram with Chitre’s English translation (Says Tuka) as my primary resource. Yet, for me, what became most apparent in Forster and Rao’s engagements with bhakti was their Brahminical interpretation of these traditions, and the challenges of reading and theorizing these engagements critically. Thus, my ongoing interest in bhakti immediately converged with my new interests in caste.

In 2006, I had an opportunity to explore the significance of bhakti in contemporary cultural and literary forms through the support of a Shastri Indo-Canadian Studies Research Fellowship in India. I attended a series of lectures on Tukaram delivered in Marathi by Chitre and Sadanand More (a philosopher and contemporary descendent of Tukaram) at the University of Pune, and I also had an opportunity to read and listen to others who were more critical of bhakti, particularly in the political context of contemporary Hindutva and the general sense of hyper-nationalism surrounding India’s recent emergence as a global super-economic power. After returning from India, I re-immersed myself in the intellectual community of the Centre for South Asian Studies at the University of Toronto and through my own research as well as dialogues with local and visiting scholars, I continued to understand the complexity of bhakti in relationship to colonial and anti-colonial discourses of caste, religion, metaphysics, and modernity in the South Asian context. Yet, ultimately, it was through the experience of returning to my primary texts (A Passage to India, The Serpent and the Rope, and The God of Small Things) and reading them closely for their theoretical as well as formal significance that I found a way to synthesize all of this material and ascertain the idea of an imagined
Indianness as the central point around which caste, Neo-Vedantic metaphysics, and modernity cohere. The original themes of exile, alienation, and bhakti thus laid out the path for this journey into Indutva fiction.

The body of this dissertation is comprised of three chapters. Each chapter is devoted to a novel, and the chapters are organized according to the chronological order of each novel’s date of publication, thus enabling a historical view of Indutva fiction throughout the twentieth century. Forster’s novel is set on the eve of Gandhian anti-colonial movements in the late colonial period (1910s and early 1920s), whereas Rao’s was published in the early years of Indian independence (post-1947), and Roy’s just after the liberalization of the country’s former socialist economy (post-1991). This is not a genealogical study; I am not arguing that literary Indianness begins with Forster and ends with Roy, let alone that the Indutva tradition is comprised solely of three novels. Rather, the rationale behind this selection of texts is about engaging diverse representations of Indianness. They have distinct historical settings, but also differences in social, cultural, and religious space: ritualistic Hindus in the princely states of colonial India (Forster); royalist, Catholic, yet symbolically Brahminical, Europeans in post-war France and Britain (Rao); and “Touchable” and Untouchable Syrian Christians amidst the rise of communism in postcolonial Kerala, India (Roy). Despite contextual differences, these three novels share an engagement with Indianness that is imagined through allegories and tropologies of caste, metaphysics, centripetality, impersonality, and civilizational essences.
Chapter 2 E. M. Forster’s A Passage to India

2 Preface

The Gokul Ashtami is a religious festival held annually to celebrate the birth of Krishna, one of the most prominent of mythological figures in the Hindu pantheon. The festival is usually held during the lunar month of Shravan (late July/early August) and it takes place over the course of eight to nine days. As with most religious festivals in the South Asian context, the rituals performed at any Gokul Ashtami vary from region to region and are similarly subject to historical factors of change and adaptation. The “Temple” section of E. M. Forster’s A Passage to India depicts the festival with details that draw partly from the author’s first-hand accounts of being stationed in the former princely state of Dewas (now a town in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh). As a private secretary to the Maharajah, Forster attended the festival in 1921 and went on to record his experiences through a series of letters that would eventually resurface in his Indian memoirs, The Hill of Devi. In a prefatory note, Forster explains the significance of his personal experiences: “The following letters on the Gokul Ashtami are the most important of my letters home, for they describe (if too facetiously) rites in which an European can seldom have shared” (100).

It is tempting to read the Gokul Ashtami episode of A Passage to India mimetically by seeking parallel descriptions and observations in The Hill of Devi; such comparisons could be used to authenticate the realism of Forster’s novel. While this chapter does take up a few cases of similarity, it places a stronger emphasis on the non-mimetic, non-realist aspects of the Gokul Ashtami episode and its significance within the novel’s allegory of Indianness. Thus, this chapter focuses less on Forster’s autobiographical experiences in Dewas than on the multiple relationships between the worlds imagined within the novel itself: the world of the Gokul Ashtami festival and the worlds outside its ritualistic, temple space (i.e., British imperialism, Western tourism, Hegelian modernity, Islam, and anti-colonial Indian nationalism). This tension between the mimetic and the imagined is
also present in Forster’s fictional engagement with Orientalism, Neo-Vedanta, and bhakti.

I am not the first to read the Gokul Ashtami episode of A Passage to India as a symbol of India’s civilizational essence. What distinguishes this reading is its emphasis on the articulations of caste, subjectivity, modernity, and counter-modernity as key tropes of Forster’s Indutva narrative. Section 2.1 of this chapter introduces the novel’s tropology through its rhetoric of “India” as a “muddle”; it also explores the significance of this rhetoric at varying levels of Indophobic racism, liberal Orientalism, and Hindu-Muslim communalism. As a starting point, the narrative of muddled Indianness is integral to the construction of two crucial subjectivities: the outsider and the insider of the Gokul Ashtami. By juxtaposing these subjectivities, the novel presents a double-vision of Indianness.

Section 2.2 explores the position and perspective of the festival’s insider subject further through a critical overview of Forster scholarship. For many readers, the representation of “India” in the novel is essentially mystical, metaphysical, and monistic. While there is validity to most of these observations, I challenge their Neo-Vedantic bias as well as their blindness to the politics of Brahminism and caste.

Section 2.3 focuses on the novel’s portrait of Professor Narayan Godbole, his characterization as a Brahmin according to the signs of his jati as well as his own varnic subjectivity; this section also contrasts Godbole with a few real-life characters from Forster’s own personal history as well as the Neo-Vedanta tradition of the time. As the central figure of the Gokul Ashtami episode, Godbole stimulates other acts of varnic translation in the festival, the totality of which produces an allegory of centripetal hierarchy. By drawing on Forster’s own rhetoric in the novel, this allegory is further examined in section 2.4 as a “Circle” – the first of two in this reading. Section 2.5 takes up various potential sites of Dionysian and carnivalesque transgression within the Circle, most of which center around the novel’s discourse of bhakti. These sites are then re-read critically and tropologically for signs of dharma, Sanskritization, and the impersonal as manifested through acts of ritual as well as both gender and inter-cultural relationships.
The traditional view of Passage as an idealist or utopian representation of Indianness is thus debunked in favour of a reading that foregrounds the power dynamics of caste and the ambivalence of Forster’s narrator.

The remaining two sections of this chapter explore Forster’s vision of Indianness in relationship to characters, spaces, and discourses that are outside the Gokul Ashtami. Section 2.6 explores the festival’s relationship to modernity through the Hegelian trope of History. The universality of the latter is critiqued through both the metaphysics of \textit{brahman} (the oneness of time) as well as the cyclical nature of ritual activity that characterizes the Gokul Ashtami as an annual festival. As a result, History is re-imagined spatially in the novel because it is displaced to a space outside the festival’s figurative “temple” space, thus rendering Indianness inaccessible as well as untranslatable. This gesture of symbolically displacing, excluding, and humbling History is developed further through the motif of the “veil”, that which is literally found in descriptions of the Mau temple but also figuratively evoked through poetic acts of linguistic nonsense, most notably the devotional phrase “God si Love”. All such veils characterize the space of Indianness doubly according to Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia, thus constituting a second allegorical “Circle” – the Circle of ritual temporality supplementing that of \textit{varnic} Indianness.

As a heterotopia, the Gokul Ashtami could be easily taken as a symbol of anti-colonial resistance to the imperialist regimes of Western modernity, but I argue that this is naïve because there are an equal, if not greater, number of signs that inscribe the Indianness of the Gokul Ashtami with a strong sense of cultural sovereignty, Brahminical and otherwise. This power dynamic is further examined through a critical engagement with Homi Bhabha’s concept of “non-sense,” one that highlights the problems of reading both the Gokul Ashtami and its representation of imagined Indianness through an arguably conventional mode of postcolonial theorizing.

Finally, in section 2.7, the limits of postcolonial theorizing are further challenged through a re-consideration of the festival’s outsider subject, specifically the position of Dr. Aziz as a Muslim-turned-secular Indian nationalist and thus a unique figure of in-betweenness
within Forster’s Indutva narrative. Azis’s nationalist turn is used by Forster as part of a larger prophesy on the limits of India’s future postcolonial modernity and its lack of sovereignty over the civilizational Indianness of heterotopic, ritualistic, varnic spaces like the Gokul Ashtami. At the same time, Aziz’s friendship with Godbole raises the possibility of his becoming an authentic member of Mau and the “real India” of Forster’s Indutva imagination by extension. The reintroduction of Godbole here also serves as a point of theoretical distinction between Forster’s Indutva narrative and political Hindutva ideology.

2.1 The “Muddle” of Indianness

The term “muddle” is a signature concept within the oeuvre of E. M. Forster. He uses it frequently to denote his characters’ experiences of confusion and uncertainty in A Room with a View and Howard’s End, and the concept takes on greater cultural significance in A Passage to India and The Hill of Devi. For the latter two works, “muddle” sums up an outsider’s impressions of the Gokul Ashtami festival, Hinduism, and ultimately, of Indian civilization. All three objects of muddleness are projected as so through a series of descriptions that open the “Temple” section of A Passage to India. In summary, Forster’s narrator writes, “they did not one thing which the non-Hindu would feel dramatically correct; this approaching triumph of India was a muddle (as we call it), a frustration of reason and form” (my italics 270).26 It should be noted that there is not a single non-Hindu or non-Indian present in the festival space. The narrator’s appeal to the reader (“we”) thus carries the rhetorical effect of articulating the subject of this “frustrated” experience in potentia. To some extent, this subject might be interpreted as being modern and Western. However, there are limits to that interpretation as the larger narrative of the novel posits a plurality of potential subjects from its cast of British as well as Indian characters.

26 All references to A Passage to India are found in the 2005 Penguin Classics edition, unless stated otherwise.
The festival appears as a muddle because it seems to lack a rational basis, and thus it is imagined as a “frustration” of the very principle that is otherwise held as “sovereign” by the grand narrators of the modern Western Enlightenment. The equal emphasis on “form” enunciates an ideal concept of art: the expression of a rational mind and one that demonstrates reason’s unique capacity to arrange, order, and therefore evoke an aesthetic sense of beauty. This brief theory of aesthetics is developed as so in the last chapter of the “Caves” section, when Fielding reflects on his departure from India and his subsequent return to England through Egypt, Greece, and Italy:

The buildings of Venice, like the mountains of Crete and the fields of Egypt, stood in the right place, whereas in poor India everything was placed wrong. He had forgotten the beauty of form among idol temples and lumpy hills; indeed, without form, how can there be beauty? Form stammered here and there in a mosque, became rigid through nervousness even, but oh, these Italian churches!.... [S]omething more precious than mosaics and marbles was offered to him now; the harmony between the works of man and the earth that upholds them, the civilization that has escaped muddle, the spirit in a reasonable form, with flesh and blood subsisting. (265)

“Beauty” is imagined as an aesthetic ideal as well as a philosophical transcendence over the state of “muddle”. It is also imagined within a global perspective where the rhetoric of beauty and muddle are doubly suggested as substitutes for civilizational differences between East and West, with Egypt unconventionally included under the latter and India as the sole representative of the former.

Forster’s narrator admits that certain forms of beauty are available in India, and this impression is also acknowledged earlier on in the novel during the scene of Aziz’s solitary meditations in a Chandrapore mosque, where he privately shows his appreciation of its architecture (the “courtyard” and “arcades”) and its artwork (the “frieze” of Allah’s “ninety-nine names”) (16). Yet, when Forster’s narrator guides the reader (again, “we”) into the temple of the Gokul Ashtami festival, the scene is clearly devoid of any similar aesthetic forms or experiences of beauty. The absence of beauty further characterizes the
festival as a muddle and in turn, a symbol of essential Indianness as well as a point of radical, civilizational alterity.

The Gokul Ashtami is thus depicted through an Orientalist style of thought, though one that is distinctively grounded in the rhetoric of “muddle.” However, Forster’s use of this rhetoric is complex and ironic, as muddle is also developed in the novel as a sign of Indianness at level of the sublime. This becomes evident through a closer look at four different sites of “muddle” within the festival. These sites are imagined visually as well as through sound, religion, and language. The first of these is visualized at the altar of the temple:

Where was the God Himself, in whose honour the congregation had gathered? Indistinguishable in the jumble of His own altar, huddled out of sight amid images of inferior descent, smothered under rose-leaves, overhung by oleographs, outblazed by golden tablets representing the Rajah’s ancestors, and entirely obscured when the wind blew, by the tattered foliage of a banana. Hundreds of electric lights had been lit in His honour (worked by an engine whose thumps destroyed the rhythm of the hymn). Yet His face could not be seen. Hundreds of His silver dishes were piled around Him with the minimum of effect. (270-71)

Some of these details are drawn directly from Forster’s personal experiences of the Gokul Ashtami festival. As he writes in The Hill of Devi: “The altar is a mass of little objects, stifled with rose leaves, the walls are hung with deplorable oleographs, the chandeliers, draperies – everything bad” (106). Where the latter description makes Forster’s critique of aesthetic distaste quite explicit, the passage above goes one step further with its critique of devotional excess. As a central object of worship, the symbol of God (that is, Krishna) is obscured from the eyes of the devotees and ironically so by the abundance of their own ritual offerings. The image builds on Hegel’s critique of Hinduism, its saguna brahman tradition of pantheism and the latter as “a degradation” of the nirguna brahman ideal down to “a multiformity of sensuous objects”. From a Hegelian perspective, the display at the altar further degrades that ideality down to the ritual offerings and ornaments in themselves, and to the point where they have no connection with the central
object of worship. This frustration of visual form thus represents a muddle at the levels of both religious practice and philosophical understanding.

The visual muddle of the altar is complemented with an aural one of a cacophony that is produced by the counterpoint of musical sounds and noises from both inside and outside the temple: the “braying banging crooning” of the festival’s “choir”, its ensemble of devotional singers and musicians; the “waltz” performed by a “Europeanized” brass band in the courtyard; the disruptive “thumps” of the electrical engine used to generate light for the altar; and the rain falling “at intervals throughout the night” (270). If the concept of orchestral harmony is privileged as the chief distinction and ordering principle of classical Western music, the soundscape of the Gokul Ashtami is distinguished by a complete lack of that principle, one that doubly registers as a lack of a parallel tradition – a classical music tradition – within the festival, and also of both harmony and beauty throughout this representation of Indian civilization in general.

The muddle of musical disharmony also provokes the larger question of what exact principle (if any) holds the festival together. This question persists right through to the end of the Gokul Ashtami episode. As the narrator observes, “Looking back at the great blur of the last twenty-four hours, no man could say where was the emotional centre of it, any more than he could locate the heart of a cloud” (300). This question also extends to the issue of religion, and it is similarly raised as the narrator offers an outsider’s perspective on Hinduism:

The fissures in the Indian soil are infinite: Hinduism, so solid from a distance, is riven into sects and clans, which radiate and join, and change their names according to the aspect from which they are approached. Study it for years with the best teachers, and when you raise your head nothing they have told you quite fits. (278)

A good example for the incomprehensibility of Hinduism is in the narrator’s engagement with Tukaram. Tukaram was a seventeenth-century Marathi poet who subsequently became revered as a mystic and an iconic symbol for the Varkari tradition that remains a popular, if not dominant, phenomenon of bhakti or devotional practice in Maharashtra to
this day. Like all Varkaris, Tukaram was a devotee of Vithala, the local deity of a pilgrimage centre in Pandharpur, and he dedicated much of his life to composing poems as an expression of his bhakti. However, when Tukaram is first mentioned in the Gokul Ashtami episode, it is in the similar context of a hymn-like poem, but in ways that ironically rewrite his legacy as the festival’s primary object of bhakti:

Tukaram, Tukaram

Thou art my father and mother and everybody.

Tukaram, Tukaram… (270)

The focus on Tukaram represents a muddle for the narrator because it distracts the congregation’s focus on “the God who confronted them” and centralizes the “saint” instead (270). By doubling the object of worship, the possibility of an ordering principle for the festival and the religion it represents thus remains elusive.

As the narrator turns his eye to a display of bhakti poems inside the temple, the muddled appearance of the festival is exposed further at the level of language and mistranslation:

The inscriptions which the poets of the state had composed were hung where they could not be read, or had twitched their drawing-pins out of the stucco, and one of them (composed in English to indicate His universality) consisted, by an unfortunate slip of the draughtsman, of the words, ‘God is Love.’

God is Love. Is this the final message of India? (271)

The latter of these inscriptions is partly imagined as an English-language translation of a line authored by an unnamed, vernacular and quite possibly Varkari poet “of the state”, but it also presents itself as an echo of the sentiment voiced by Mrs. Moore earlier on in the “Mosque” section of the novel (271). Amidst a heated conversation with her son Ronny over the purpose of British rule in India, Moore argues, “India is part of the earth. And God has put us on the earth in order to be pleasant to each other. God. . . is. . . love. . .” (46). The recurrence of the same phrase in the translated inscriptions of the Mau temple might suggest the universality of her sentiment; the unconscious spontaneity of
her expression (as suggested by both the ellipses and the references to the mysterious presence of “something” that “made her go on”) also suggests a common mystical ground between her approach to Christianity and the festival’s approach to Varkari bhakti, if not Hinduism in general (46). However, the misspelling of “is” as “si” is a conspicuous error\(^{27}\) and though it is marginal (not to mention both positioned and perceived within a marginal location of the temple “where it could not be read”), the narrator invests it with the singular power to characterize a perception of the festival in toto as a muddle, and this is subsequently presented as a possible “final message” on the essential nature of Indian civilization.

Much like the sound of “ou-boum” in the Marabar caves, the translational error of “God si Love” sounds out a number of other echoes, including an incident from earlier on in the novel centred around Moore’s son, Ronny Heaslop. After the gathering at Fielding’s home, Ronny reacts negatively to Aziz’s near-perfect (and therefore failed) attempt at following the fashions of Chandrapore’s Western elite. He complains to his fiancée, Miss Adela Quested: “‘Aziz was exquisitely dressed, from tie-pin to spats, but he had forgotten his back collar-stud, and there you have the Indian all over: inattention to detail; the fundamental slackness that reveals the race’” (75). Ronny’s critique is no less Indophobic than Mill’s assessment of Indian civilization as an irrational and therefore “rude” Other – a negation that ultimately serves to affirm the “civility” of the British colonial Self. The similarity between the missing stud and the misspelling of “si” as objects characterized by “an inattention to detail” also brings us back to the aesthetic issue of how “in poor India everything was placed wrong”. In the spirit of Hegelian rhetoric, one might be tempted to read all such signs as grander symbols of civilizational incapability: that is, India’s failure to express beauty and exercise rational judgment as supplements to the Hegelian grand narrative of India’s incapability to write History.

\(^{27}\) According to Adwaita P. Ganguly, this line was originally composed as “God is love. Is this the first message of India?” (306). In subsequent editions, Forster altered it to highlight the element of mistranslation and this change has remained in place right up to the last edition (the 1967 Pocket Edition) that was published during his lifetime. In the “Notes” of the recent 2005 Penguin Classics edition, this change is validated by a footnote on Forster’s personal encounter with the same mistranslated phrase at the “Mogul Sarai railway station” in 1913 (367 n.33.3).
While the concepts of History and beauty are not the same thing, they do share a common basis in the Enlightenment notion of reason. They also share a legacy of association with colonial modes of epistemology and perception. As literary critic Vijay Mishra states, beauty is “a distinctly Enlightenment concept and has about it that special ordering of nature that formed the basis of colonization itself” (8).

That said, Forster’s evocation of History, beauty, reason and aesthetics in A Passage to India goes further to complicate the stable notions of Western modernity, its grand narratives and the knowing gaze of its dominant subject. Firstly, as we will see in section 2.6, these muddles of the Gokul Ashtami (and especially “God si love”) are doubly presented as contestations and equally grand acts of uncrowning the Hegelian ideal of History. Secondly, the nature of muddled Indianness is such that it has the potential to not only offend the racist, colonial sensibilities of a character like Ronny, but they would also lose their appeal before a liberal humanist of “no racial feeling” like Fielding” (57). After all, it is primarily through Fielding that the novel’s theory of aesthetic beauty is articulated in the novel. Thirdly, it is worth considering that while Aziz is an Indian, he similarly views Hinduism as a muddled religion. As he confesses to Fielding,

> It is useless discussing Hindus with me. Living with them teaches me no more. When I think I annoy them, I do not. When I think I don’t annoy them, I do. Perhaps they will sack me for tumbling onto their doll’s-house; on the other hand perhaps they will double my salary. (304)

What these three subjectivities – the racist, Indophobic colonial, the liberal humanist sahib, and the Hinduphobic Muslim-Indian – share is a common potential for viewing the Gokul Ashtami, and the type of India that it symbolically represents, from the perspective of an outsider.

However, Forster’s construction of this potential outsider perspective is designed to tell us little of what India essentially is or of which aesthetic, cultural, scientific or epistemological achievements it is incapable of reaching. For Forster’s omniscient narrator, India is a not a muddle – at least, not in essence. Rather, muddle is a sign of the outsider’s perception of Indianness. The potential subjectivity of that outsider includes a
diverse set of characters: Ronny, Fielding, Aziz and the intended reader (“we”). As a result, it is through the construction of this potential outsider subject that the narrator employs the literal representations of muddle to serve as a set of symbolic veils that conceal a view of the festival’s inside-space as well as the consciousness, subjectivity, and power relations shared by those on the inside.

Despite the emphasis on muddle, there are moments when the veils are partly lifted and the insider’s perspective of the festival is brought into the foreground. To explore one such moment, let us return to the scene of the altar, when the image of Krishna is briefly revealed to the participants in the festival:

The assembly was in a tender, happy state unknown to an English crowd, it seethed like a beneficent potion. When the villagers broke cordon for a glimpse of the silver image, a most beautiful and radiant expression came into their faces, a beauty in which there was nothing personal, for it caused them all to resemble one another during the moment of its indwelling, and only when it was withdrawn did they revert to individual clods. (270)

In Hinduism, this experience of taking a “glimpse” of the divine is conceptualized as *darsana*. Diana L. Eck explains the concept further: “Beholding the image is an act of worship, and through the eyes one gains the blessing of the divine” (1998 3). For Forster’s narrator, the blessing received by the festival’s participants appears to register at the level of affect rather than sight as they experience a feeling of trans-individual, impersonal oneness. As a result, if the feeling connotes a *darsanic* vision of God, it might be read as an evocation of *nirguna brahman* – the ultimate reality of a formless, impersonal oneness among all things in the universe. This brief revelation has a non-fictional analogue in *The Hill of Devi*. Despite the muddles of the altar’s visual display, Forster admits, “Only one thing is beautiful – the expression on the faces of the people as they bow to the shrine” (106). This observation is not elaborated further from a Neo-Vedantic perspective on *nirguna brahman*, but Forster nevertheless places a similar emphasis on the participants’ sense of affect as well as aesthetics. The terms “beauty” and “beautiful” are conspicuous in both *Passage* and *Devi*, though it is arguably more
accurate to read them as Forster’s rhetoric for the concept of the sublime. In *A Passage to India*, the rhetoric of beauty-as-sublimity highlights a counterpoint to the various muddles that are otherwise perceived as being devoid of aesthetic beauty and thus challenge the grand narrative of muddled Indianess. To explore the significance of this counterpoint further, let us consider the philosophical, political, and religious connotations of the sublime.

Drawing on the work of Immanuel Kant and Paul de Man, Vijay Mishra explains the concept of the sublime as an aesthetic mode that is conventionally used to express “a purely inward experience of consciousness” (8). Thus, where the mode of the beautiful is to be observed, the sublime is one that can only be felt or experienced internally – as Forster demonstrates through the participatory aspects of the festival. Like Kant’s parallel concept of the “beautiful,” the sublime also has a history of colonial and Orientalist association. As Mishra explains, “the number of times “Oriental” art has been referred to (explicitly or implicitly) as sublime in Orientalist and colonial discourse probably exceeds the number of times the term beautiful has been used” (9). However, while some of this history includes the romantic appreciation of “Oriental art”, the rhetoric of the sublime is doubly significant as a means of negation, contestation, and thus what Forster calls the “frustration” of rational order and agency. Mishra explains, “whereas the beautiful is about the West and history, about principles of order, the sublime is a threat to the imagination, a subversive impulse with the sole aim of disturbing or doing violence to the intellect” (9). Thus, the sublimity of the East is Janus-faced: it indirectly signifies the various incapabilities of Oriental subjectivity; it also signifies a “threat” of violence that must be pacified or contained. 28

28 In the case of Mrs. Moore’s traumatic experience of the Marabar caves, her experience of its mysterious echo might be interpreted as a *darsanic* encounter with the sublime oneness of death and dissolution (“Pathos, piety, courage - they exist, but are identical, and so is filth. Everything exists, nothing has value”), and this might also be read as an example of what happens when the threat of the sublime is not contained, especially in a colonial Indian setting (139). Conversely, the arrest of Aziz might be read as an attempt to restore the “beauty” of British femininity through the means of colonial order and state control.
Yet, for Mishra, there is an older grand narrative of the sublime that encompasses various pre-colonial traditions of *bhakti* poetry. He presents this argument as the central thesis of *Devotional Poetics and the Indian Sublime*:

bhakti or devotional poetry is superimposed upon a sublime narrative where the subject searches for an impossible ideal that is symbolized through a plethora of Gods and Goddesses. Although this impossible ideal is represented through the image or the icon, the Absolute Brahman as ideal, however, remains the sublime object that, ultimately, defies all representation in time and place. (16)

As a sublime object of devotion, *brahman* exceeds language and simultaneously puts language in crisis; as a result, it proliferates in poetic muddles. However, as Mishra argues, such acts of representation can be read as tropes to the sublimity of *nirguna brahman*: “For the Hindu it is not a matter of never denying this proposition but of continually attempting to trope the infinite by grounding it in the phenomenal even as the canonical texts stress the impossibility of such a grounding” (13). The tropology of *bhakti* runs counter to Hegel’s thesis on *saguna brahman* as a “degradation”, and its logic enables a similar disjunction between the muddled appearances and sublime experiences described in the “Temple” section of *A Passage to India*. This disjunction serves Forster’s narrative in two different ways. It opens up a mystical sense of double-vision, one that continues to define the dominant focus of literary criticism on the Gokul Ashtami episode. However, for the concerns of the present study of Indianness, the disjunction between the muddle and the sublime goes beyond aesthetics and serves to articulate a line of unbreachable differences between the inside and outside; the festival participant and the would-be observer; and finally, those who experience the feeling of *darsanic* revelation and the pleasures of the formless versus those who are likely to be frustrated by its muddled representations and therefore incapable of knowing or accessing the festival.

The next section will look at how Forster’s narrative of the festival as a double-vision of sublime, yet muddled and inaccessible, Indianness has been celebrated by scholars throughout the twentieth century. While such idealist readings of the novel are at times
validated by an awareness of Neo-Vedantic discourse, their celebration of Indianness is largely focused on aspects that are said to be lacking in modern Western philosophy and Abrahamic religious traditions. Ultimately, the greater concern is that this history of scholarship has mystified the issue of caste. The next section highlights this myopia and uses it as a point of departure for a critical reading on the representation of caste and varna as key tropes in Forster’s Indutva narrative.

2.2 Mystical and Metaphysical Indianness

Throughout the twentieth-century, Anglo-American scholars have approached A Passage to India with an awareness of both Neo-Vedantic metaphysics and the Sanskritic rhetoric of nirguna brahman. However, even for those unfamiliar with this rhetoric, the Gokul Ashtami festival is nevertheless read as a distinctly Indian symbol of oneness amidst the literal representations of muddle and abject chaos. The history of this interpretation goes back to Lionel Trilling, one of the earliest scholars on Forster, and his reading of the festival as “a vision of ultimate nullity” (159) and one that is dominantly articulated through Mrs. Moore’s perspective, beginning with her traumatic experience at the Marabar Caves and climaxing with “Godbole’s acceptance” of her presence at the height of the festival (132). Although Moore’s presence in the festival is wholly spectral and disembodied, Trilling insists on reading her as the dominant subject of the episode and thus argues, “Mrs. Moore has moved closer and closer to Indian ways of feeling” (my italics 155). Interestingly enough, Trilling also reads her tragically as a victim of this particularly “Oriental” and “Indian” experience: “She has had the beginning of the Hindu vision and it has crushed her” (my italics 25). Trilling’s reading is mildly Indophobic and clearly Eurocentric, but it remains noteworthy because its associates the festival with an essentially metaphysical and mystical idea of Hinduism and Indian civilization by extension.

Malcolm Bradbury makes similar observations in his reading of A Passage to India, though in a more optimistic tone. He reads the festival as a symbol for the “multiverse,” the opposite of a universe, and thus Bradbury’s conceptual term for addressing modernist
anxieties around forces of change, difference, and “anarchy” (34). The division of the world into East and West is one sign of this predicament, but Bradbury argues that it goes back further in the history of Indian civilization because “India is schismatic with itself” and caste is mentioned as one of the reasons for this (36). As a result, the “Indians” are celebrated for supposedly having resolved this modern anxiety long ago by adapting to a multiversal way of living: that is, “by being comprehensive or passive rather than orderly or rationalistic” (39). Thus, in Bradbury’s reading of the novel, the ideal unity of the universe is not one that can be realized or fulfilled in writing. Instead, it is momentarily revealed through a sublime mode, and the Gokul Ashtami is the novel’s primary vehicle for making that revelation possible:

The Mau festival is the celebration of the formlessness of the Indian multiverse, seen for a moment incisively. The poetic realm of the novel, in which above all Mrs. Moore and Godbole have participated, and which has dominated the book’s primary art, is reconciled with the muddle of the world of men, in an emotional cataract that momentarily repairs the divisions of the spiritual world (through Godbole’s revelation) and the social world (through the festival itself). It satisfies much of the passion for inclusiveness that has been one thread in the novel, the desire that heaven should include all because India is all. (41-42)

Bradbury’s ideal view of the Gokul Ashtami festival as a site of mystical double-vision is developed further in John Drew’s reading of the festival as a celebration of a “cosmic and impersonal” oneness (84). For Drew, the festival doubly affirms a common ground between Advaita Vedanta (but really Neo-Vedanta) and Neo-Platonism, and therefore a revelation of East-West civilizational harmony along philosophical lines. While this reading is interesting in terms of its comparative metaphysics approach, it becomes problematic when Drew turns to the political issue of colonialism and attempts a response to the postcolonial critiques of Edward Said. Drew argues that the novel represents a radical expression of post-imperial Orientalism because it reflects the Neo-Platonist spirit of “those who were possessed by, rather than by those who possessed, India” (101). Thus, by imagining a pre-colonial vision of ideal Indianness, Forster gives the postcolonial reader a unique opportunity to know India without dominating it.
There are a few other critics who subscribe to similar Orientalist inversions of Indianness and the West, but then who also go one step further by reading *A Passage to India* conversely as an indirect statement on the shortcomings of Islam. The mild version of this view is in a psychoanalytic reading by Wilfred Stone:

> The Marabar Caves, antedating human religion and history, are “not holy” to the Hindu, yet what happened in that engendering egg is instinctively understood by Professor Godbole, the Hindu, while it only terrifies, puzzles, or bores the others. The Hindus possessed India long before the latecoming Moslems and Christians, and throughout the book it is they who are closest to elemental knowledge, to the meaning of ancient myth. (301)

A more extreme and arguably fallacious version of such thinking is the argument presented by G. K. Das, one of the first Indian scholars of *A Passage to India*. Das claims that *Passage* represents a crucial stage in Forster’s own personal understanding of Hinduism and Indianness by extension:

> [The novel] shows him seriously questioning some aspects of Hinduism and Islam, and emerging finally more in sympathy with Hinduism than Islam. Scrutinizing the possibilities of a value in the spiritualism of India, which might be tenable for him personally, he seems to have seen in Hinduism, rather than in Islam, such a possibility. *A Passage to India* shows his personal outlook on Hinduism only in a tentative form; but there is evidence that the novel registers the process of his recognition of a higher value in Hinduism – which he was to affirm directly and more specifically in some of his subsequent writings about India. (93)

For Das, what enabled Forster to see Hinduism as a religion of “higher value” and therefore more essentially Indian is never spelled out to the reader. Nevertheless, this lack of detail on the part of Das is what gives Hinduism its sublime character, and this too is what distinguishes it from Islam. He writes, “the complexity of Hinduism had still eluded him while he had entirely comprehended the essential meaning of Islam” (99).

Ultimately, what makes Das’ reading fallacious is that it seeks continuity between
Forster’s fiction and his personal outlook on life, though this tendency is not uncommon in the work of Das’s Anglo-American peers.

There is no doubt that the concepts of double-vision and brahman-ical oneness are integral to Forster’s construction of the Gokul Ashtami episode as a crucial site of Indianness in *A Passage to India*. However, there is a political dimension to these representations, one that is conveniently obscured in readings such as those discussed above. In my reading of the episode, there are three main issues that underlie the politics of Forster’s double-vision and his critics’ obsession with mystical Indianness.

The first is the issue of Vedanta. While the tradition is not nominally invoked (be it according to the classical Advaita tradition or its modern Neo-Vedantic incarnation), it is indirectly or directly privileged by scholars drawn to the impersonal, the formless, and the monistic aspects of that which Vedanta conceptualizes as nirguna brahman. This is admittedly a valid interpretation given that Godbole has an explicitly non-dualist view of reality. He articulates this to Fielding on the eve of his departure for a new life in Mau:

> Good and evil are different as their names imply. But, in my own humble opinion, they are both of them aspects of my Lord. He is present in one, absent in the other, and the difference between presence and absence is great, as great as my feeble mind can grasp. Yet absence implies presence, absence is not non-existence, and we are therefore entitled to repeat, ‘Come, come, come.’ (167)

Godbole utters these words in a manner that is both self-deprecating and cryptic (and therefore seemingly muddled). They mask his sense of sagely and as I will later argue, Brahminical and guru-like authority. While these words are uttered long before Forster’s narrative arrives at the event of the Gokul Ashtami (“two years later in time”), they are the last words that Godbole utters before he reappears in the “Temple” section of the novel and thus they provide a philosophical frame for the festival episode (269). Of course, the episode draws on other traditions, including vernacular ones like Varkari bhakti, but Forster weaves all of these together in a manner that nevertheless affirms the modernist, Neo-Vedantic grand narrative of non-dualism (advaita) as “India’s principle philosophical system” (Drew 81) – a grand narrative that has been thoroughly critiqued.
and deconstructed for its colonial Indological roots by Richard King in *Religion and Orientalism*.

The second issue is with the celebratory reading of the festival as a civilizational symbol for the *inclusive* spirit and therefore philosophical superiority of Hindu Indianess. As we will see in the later sections of this chapter, there is no denying that the atmosphere of the Gokul Ashtami is envisioned by Forster as a strongly inclusive space. This extends to the use of humour, dancing, bodily intimacy, and other elements that might otherwise be read by Forster’s contemporaries (as well as our own) as Dionysian, carnivalesque, profane, or transgressive. A good example of this impression lies in the depiction of the gender-bending games played by “the principle nobles of the state” as they take on the roles of Krishna and his female gopis (“the wanton dairy maids of Brindaban”) (274).

They removed their turbans, and one put a lump of butter on his forehead and waited for it to slide down his nose into his mouth. Before it could arrive, another stole up behind him, snatched the melting morsel, and swallowed it himself. All laughed exultantly at discovering that the divine sense of humour coincided with their own. ‘God si love!’ There is fun in heaven. God can play practical jokes upon Himself, draw chairs away from beneath His own posteriors, set His own turbans on fire, and steal His own petticoats when He bathes. By sacrificing good taste, the worship achieved what Christianity had shirked: the inclusion of merriment. All spirit as well as all matter must participate in salvation, and if practical jokes are banned, the circle is incomplete. (274)

This passage reveals as much about the festival’s Vedantic spirit of oneness and monistic fulfillment as it does about the sense of both cultural gaze and self-perception. The latter aspects are enunciated in the narrator’s admiration of how the festival “achieved what Christianity had shirked” – the “inclusion of merriment”, but also the commitment to a spirit of inclusion – and thus how Forster tropes the latter in his rhetoric of “the circle”. Whether or not Forster is conscious of this or not, his defining view of these rituals through a mirror-like awareness of a lack within Christianity, Abrahamic religions, and even Western modernity has a precedence that goes back to nineteenth-century Romantic
thought. King discusses this dynamic within the Western grand narrative of Hinduism as a “mystical” religion:

However, for many of the Romantics ‘the mystic East’ represented the spirituality that much of contemporary Christian religion seemed to lack. Thus, as the term ‘mystical’ became divorced from a Christian context and was applied to other religions by Western theologians and Orientalists, it continued to function at home as the site of a power struggle in the battle to define European and Christian cultural identity. (97)

By this logic, Forster’s depiction of the Gokul Ashtami festival represents another chapter in the history of Orientalist thought. The festival is presented as a symbol of Hindu inclusivity and consequently a crucial point of difference through which Occidental or Abrahamic religions are challenged to recognize the epistemological limits of their own religions. This is not the same style of thought that is used to politically or economically dominate a part of the “East”, but it is an Orientalist style that serves to imagine the East (Hindu India) in a tropological role through which it enables an equally essentialist construction (or reconstruction) of the modern Western subject.

The third issue within the scholarly tradition of reading the Gokul Ashtami episode as a mystical or metaphysical double-vision is that it has thus far completely mystified the issue of caste and inequity. The latter topic is occasionally touched on by scholars. After all, the characterization of the “untouchable” employed as a “punkah-wallah” during the scene of Aziz’s trial makes this classic trope of Indianness hard to miss (205). Nevertheless, the festival is generally read as a carnivalesque ritual of reversal where the participants of the Gokul Ashtami enjoy a moment, however transient and tenuous, of casteless oneness. As Michael Spencer argues, “[i]n India the festival represents a complete overturning of the caste system, since everyone is mingled together in an act of worship which would never occur in the daily routine of the average Indian village” (286). Again, while there are indeed signs of inter-caste mixing in the Gokul Ashtami episode, the festival can also be read as a symbol of reconstructed varnic order. Much of this order is brought to fulfillment through the actions of Godbole, who is clearly
identified in the novel as a Brahmin. The next two sections of this chapter will further examine Godbole’s presence in both the festival and the novel as a whole in order to discern the *varnic* aspects of his Brahmin identity and how Forster’s narrator imagines it in terms that are strongly non-realist and thus contribute to an equally fictional notion of Indianness.

### 2.3 *Varna* and the Fictional Basis of Godbole’s Brahminism

Professor Narayan Godbole is first introduced to the novel in the context of the informal gathering at Fielding’s home. Before Godbole arrives, Fielding describes him as one of his “assistants” at the college in Chandrapore (61). In response, Aziz attempts to offer a few additional details on Godbole’s caste and ethnic identity - “Oho, the Deccani Brahman!” (61). The utterance is a rhetorical gesture made to demonstrate Aziz’s insider knowledge on Indian culture. He then goes on to explain the cultural differences between the Indians of Godbole’s community and his own:

… Do you know what Deccani Brahmans say? That England conquered India from them – from them, mind, and not from the Moguls. Is not that like their cheek? They have even bribed it to appear in textbooks, for they are so subtle and immensely rich. Professor Godbole must be quite unlike all other Deccani Brahmans from all I can hear say. A most sincere chap. (61)

Although the closing line of this passage demonstrates Aziz’s willingness to see and respect Godbole as an individual separate from his community, it is nevertheless preceded by an expression of religio-communal anxiety, one that symbolically evokes the Mughal-Maratha imperial rivalry of the mid-eighteenth century. In *E. M. Forster’s India*, G. K. Das explores the Maratha aspect of this history further as a means of uncovering a deeper cultural understanding of Godbole’s caste identity. He translates Forster’s rhetoric of “Deccani Brahmans” as a euphemism for the “Chitpavan Brahmin” *jati* community that played an integral role in the expansion of the Maratha empire (103). Das also places greater emphasis on this *jati*’s political reassertions during the subsequent era of the
British Raj. He argues that despite the fall of the Maratha empire, the Chitpavan Brahmin community continued to hold a high profile by securing colonial administrative positions and more subversively, through their participation and leadership in various anti-colonial movements (103). Tilak and Gokhale are cited as two such figures that Forster would have been acquainted with through the publication of Valentine Chirol’s 1910 report, *Indian Unrest*; the latter is referenced in *The Hill of Devi* (Das 146 n.43). For Chirol, the Maratha empire demonstrated the classic early Orientalist tropes of a “theocratic state” whose “spiritual and secular authority were concentrated in the hands of the Brahmans” (Das 104). Interestingly, this grand narrative remains intact within Das’ reading of Godbole.

The historical hegemonies of the Chitpavan Brahmin *jati* and the Maratha empire are indeed relevant for reading the politics of Aziz’s gaze and his outsider’s view of “Deccani Brahmans”, but Forster also departs from the authority of this knowledge in his characterization of Godbole. As Forster stated in a 1968 interview, the origins of Godbole are essentially non-realist: “I never imagined anyone like him. Godbole was mainly constructed by me” (Das 103). That said, the Brahminism that Godbole represents is one that has less to do with the early modern history of Chitpavan Brahmans as a dominant *jati* in Maharashtra, and more with the *varnic* Brahminical history of Hindu ritual practice and discourse from the *Vedas* to *Manu*: that is, of the Brahmin as a figure of ritual authority. The latter is indeed a form of power and one that Godbole demonstrates throughout the novel, but he exercises it in a manner that goes beyond and above what he seems to regard as the provincial realm of politics, be it in the context of Maratha imperialism or anti-colonial nationalism. His performance in the narrative also refutes the Orientalist stereotype of the Brahmin as a theocrat, let alone of India as a theocracy.

One key aspect of Godbole’s *varnic* Brahminism is expressed through his anxiety over pollution. This anxiety is evident when he makes his first appearance at Fielding’s gathering: “He took his tea at a little distance from the outcastes” (66). While the gathering is intended by Fielding as an informal gathering of liberal-minded colonials and educated Indian elites, Godbole nevertheless approaches it as an *avarnic* space, one that he is willing to enter without compromising his beliefs in Brahminical ritual purity. The
gesture is reiterated twice in the Gokul Ashtami episode. The first occasion is when Aziz greets Godbole just after the first set of rituals: “‘Hullo!’ he called, and it was the wrong remark, for the devotee indicated by the circular gestures of his arms that he did not want to be disturbed” (277). The second occasion is a more explicit case when Aziz approaches Godbole more closely in the moments leading up to the Sweepers’ procession: “[Aziz] nearly collided with the Minister of Education. “Ah, you might make me late” – meaning that the touch of a non-Hindu would necessitate another bath” (290).

The rhetoric of “non-Hindu” is significant here because it articulates the uniqueness of Godbole’s perception. He does not necessarily negate Aziz as a religio-cultural Other so much as “caste” him as an avarnic figure of anticipated pollution. Godbole’s sense of varnic perception is arguably devoid of the ethno-religious communal rivalry that characterizes Aziz in his view of Godbole as a “Deccani Brahman”. It is also significant that Godbole never has anything negative to say about Muslims or any other “non-Hindu” group in the novel. In fact, the interiority of Mau is imagined as a religio-cultural space where the Hindus appear to be oblivious to most forms of religious communalism or even racial forms of difference and discrimination. This style of thought is brought to fore when Aziz relocates to Mau: “Without [Godbole, Aziz] could never have grasped problems so totally different from those of Chandrapore. For here the cleavage was between Brahman and non-Brahman; Moslems and English were quite out of the running, and sometimes not mentioned for days” (my italics 277-78). This “cleavage” is not one that excludes non-Hindus (“Moslems and English”) from living or visiting Mau. Rather, it signifies a style of thought that paradoxically places Brahmin varnic subjectivity more or less at the centre but arguably without the Self-Other dynamic that generally characterizes most ethnocentric forms of dominant subjectivity.

These unique aspects of Godbole’s varnic worldview are developed further through a counterpoint with Chandrapore’s colonial Christians: i.e., the two missionaries, “old Mr Graysford and young Mr Sorley” (34). Their discourse on the “divine hospitality” of Christianity is described as follows:

In our father’s house are many mansions, they taught, and there alone will the incompatible multitudes of mankind be welcomed and soothed. Not one shall be
This discourse is extended to include “monkeys” and “jackals”, but then Sorley anxiously draws a line for “wasps” as well as “oranges, cactuses, crystals and mud” (34). He argues, “We must exclude someone from our gathering, or we shall be left with nothing” (34). Yet, a wasp appears in the Gokul Ashtami episode and plays a role in the narrative of Godbole’s trance; the same is true for the mud that he smears on his forehead just after the climax of the festival. Thus, in Godbole’s *varnic* worldview, there are no social, religious, or cultural Others – be they Muslim, Christian or even of the animal world.

However, as emphasized in the previous passage on Godbole and Aziz’s reunion in Mau, the festival’s spirit of absolute inclusivity does not diminish the admission that Mau has its own distinctive set of social “problems” – mainly the “cleavage” of caste. In the next section, I will argue that this “cleavage” of caste is also integral to Forster’s vision of the festival episode. The festival is allegorically envisioned as what I will figuratively describe as a “Circle” of oneness and inclusivity. However, this Circle is also produced through the means of *varnic* subject-formation. Historically, *varna* originated as a system of differentiating the degrees of “purity” and “pollution” for participants within the context of Vedic ritual performance. In *Passage*, it is precisely through similar acts of ritual performance that the *varnic* “cleavage” between “Brahman and non-Brahman” is translated into being. This dynamic will be explored further in the next section through two such instances of ritual performance and varnic translation: the Rajah’s naming ceremony and the Sweepers’ procession. These rituals are significant as acts of imagined Indianness, but also for the manner in which they revise rituals of the Vedic past and how they challenge the critical perspectives of certain traditions of modern literary theory (i.e., Bakhtin and postcolonial theory).
2.4 Circle I: An Allegory of *Varnic* Indianness

The Rajah’s naming ceremony takes place late at night on the first day of the Gokul Ashtami festival and it follows the ritual enactment of Krishna’s birth. It is also depicted as an act of symbolic exchange between Godbole and the Rajah. The narrator explains,

A cobra of papier-mâché now appeared on the carpet, also a wooden cradle swinging from a frame. Professor Godbole approached the latter with a red silk napkin in his arms. The napkin was God, not that it was, and the image remained in the blur of the altar. It was just a napkin, folded into a shape which indicated a baby’s. The Professor dandled it and gave it to the Rajah, who, making a great effort, said, “I name this child Shri Krishna,” and tumbled it into the cradle. Tears poured from his eyes, because he had seen the Lord’s salvation. He was too weak to exhibit the silk baby to his people, his privilege in former years. His attendants lifted him up, a new path was cleared through the crowd, and he was carried to a less sacred part of the palace. (273-74)

The focus of this scene is partly on the Rajah’s performative speech act: he announces the name of the “child” and his words have the power to bring its identity into being. There is also the presence of the napkin which functions as a symbol for the “child”, but more importantly as an object of divinity and devotional worship. It is similarly an object of performativity, though one that is brought into being through gestures rather than acts of speech.

Yet, it should be noted that Godbole is the one who produces the napkin and then offers it to the altar where it is obscured from sight much in the same way that the previous symbol of divinity – “a silver image the size of a spoon” – is obscured in the rituals leading up to the ritual reenactment of Krishna’s birth (269). For the potential outsider, the altar is partly imagined as an aesthetic muddle, but for Godbole and the other participants of the festival, it arguably holds ritual significance as a focal point of the temple and a primary site of absolute purity. Godbole’s orientation to the site is emphasized twice in the “Temple” section’s opening passage: “Some hundreds of miles westwards of the Marabar Hills, and two years later in time, Professor Narayan Godbole
stands in the presence of God... He and Professor Godbole stood at opposite ends of the same strip of carpet” (269). His relationship is thus established as one of immediacy, and this spatial sense of privilege doubly affirms his varnic subjectivity as a Brahmin.29

In the context of the naming ceremony, Godbole continues to perform his varnic subjectivity by demonstrating his privilege and power to mediate the napkin in order to translate the subjectivity of other participants according to the varnic scheme of purity and pollution. The first of other translated figures is obviously the Rajah. Interestingly, the performative translation of his identity is anticipated when he first enters the temple space as he and other symbols of his political authority are regarded as agents of pollution: “Nor could the litter be set down, lest it defiled the temple by becoming a throne” (287). Nothing – not even the Rajah – is to contest the absolute authority of the pure, as represented by Krishna, the altar, and Godbole as a varnic Brahmin. The Rajah is translated as a Kshatriya subject when he receives the offering of the napkin from Godbole. According to Forster’s narrator, this position of varnic subjectivity would be doubly affirmed had the Rajah been in better health to “exhibit the silk baby” – that is, to further mediate this symbol of the pure – “to his people”, as this practice had always been his ritual “privilege in former years” (274). The performativity of this act would then have the effect of translating the “people” according to the relatively less pure/more polluted subjectivity of the festival’s Vaishya representatives.30 This particular translation does not happen literally in the novel, but it is nevertheless imagined by Forster as a ritual possibility and one that is otherwise characteristic of both the festival and the society’s sense of caste and spatial order.

29 David Shusterman’s interventionist reading of this image is completely opposite to this. He argues for Godbole’s distance with God, basing his argument on the last line in the passage: “He and Professor Godbole stood at opposite ends of the same strip of carpet” (283). For Shusterman, “the carpet is symbolic of the entire universe, of God’s completeness” and therefore presents a striking image of “Godbole and God stand[ing] at opposite ends” of this cosmological spectrum (432). This is a valid reading, but it contributes to a bizarre conclusion where Godbole’s actions are declared to be of an “evil” nature (435). While I want to problematize the politics of Godbole’s varnic subjectivity, I still see Godbole generally operating within his own moral code of ethics – that is, of duty (dharma) and social harmony (rta). To interpret his actions as “evil” is arguably a misinterpretation.

30 The possibility of the Rajah’s engagement with the larger public affirms Wendy Doniger’s translation of Vaishya as “the People”, rather than the more specific translation Thapar offers of “cultivators and traders.”
It is worth reconsidering the varnic resonances of this scene within the social and historical context of Vedic ritual. As previously discussed in section 1.2, varna is a concept of ritual status that was historically brought into practice during the Vedic era and specifically in the context of royal ceremonies. Typically, the “purity” of the Brahmin priest was based on his privilege to perform the ceremony with uncontested access to the absolute purity of the sacrificial fire. However, it was the less pure/more polluted Kshatriya raja that financed the ceremony as an act of royal legitimation. As a result, these performances fulfilled the purpose of spectacle: “The public sacrifices were occasions when the wealth of a raja was collected and displayed via the rituals” (Thapar 2003 129). Regardless, the indirect consequence of these performances was that they “tended to increase the power of the priest, without whom the sacrifice could not take place” (128). Forster’s dramatization of the naming ceremony invokes this spirit of varnic co-dependency symbolically through Godbole and the Rajah’s varnic translation. The custom of the festival requires the Rajah to pronounce the name of the napkin and then to display it to the larger, less ritually pure audience within the temple. However, he cannot perform these ritual gestures without Godbole’s mediating presence as a Brahminical figure of ritual authority.

That said, the exchange between Godbole and the Rajah as Brahmin and Kshatriya actors also serves as a revision of the Vedic precedent and particularly so in its uncrowning effects on the Rajah. The naming ceremony requires him to play a Kshatriya role, but it fails to make a spectacle of his royal power. When he first enters the temple, “[n]o one greeted the Rajah, nor did he wish it; this was no moment for human glory” (272). Similarly, when the Rajah dies on the last day of the festival, the news is kept secret from the discursive sphere of the festival because, according to the narrator, “religion is a living force to the Hindus, and can at certain moments fling down everything that is petty and temporary in their nature” (289). The Rajah – or rather, the news of his death – is one such object that been flung down and thus uncrowned. Yet, at the same time, this uncrowning takes place paradoxically through a varnic re-crowning of the Rajah as a Kshatriya subject. If the Brahmin is the figure of ritual authority, the Kshatriya is one of political authority. This distinction does not make the Brahmin a theocratic ruler, but it does enunciate the sovereignty of religion over the political domain, and in ways that also
re-imagine religion according to the ritual logic of varnic order. This hierarchy of religion and politics is also articulated in the novel through differences in architectural space: the temple carries significance as a Brahminical space and the larger domain of the palace is consequently signified as the “less sacred” Kshatriya counterpart (274). Conversely, of the two spaces, the temple is less visible and accessible because of its location deep inside the palace: “This corridor in the palace of Mau opened through other corridors into a courtyard” (269). It is logical to conclude that the temple is financed by the Rajah in the same way that royal legitimation ceremonies were by his Vedic predecessors, but the effect of the Gokul Ashtami is such that it spatially inscribes the palace and the everyday life of Mau in general as being as exterior to the temple and therefore an outside space. Yet, none of this makes the Rajah an outsider. As a Kshatriya subject, he remains on the inside of the temple’s allegorical Circle of varnic order.

Godbole and the Rajah’s ritual exchange of the napkin is the event that evokes Forster’s allegorical Circle of varnic Indianness in a latent state of becoming. This allegory becomes much more concrete through the ritual of the Sweepers’ procession, an event that signals the moment of the Circle’s near-complete being. The relationship between the two events is also signified through the inverted symmetry of their timing: the naming ceremony takes place on the first night of the festival, and the Sweepers’ procession takes place on the morning of the festival’s last day. Before the procession actually takes place, the narrator describes the arrival of the Sweepers’ Band and their position as a central point of focus at this particular moment in the festival episode:

The Sweepers’ Band was arriving. Playing on sieves and other emblems of their profession, they marched straight at the gate of the palace with the air of a victorious army. All other music was silent, for this was ritually the moment of the Despised and the Rejected; the God could not issue from his temple until the unclean Sweepers played their tune, they were the spot of filth without which the spirit cannot cohere. (291)

For the sake of counter-argument, let us read this procession as a carnivalesque reversal of social order, and especially so given that it follows the symbolic uncrowning of the
Rajah. Since the Sweepers are represented as the lowest of all low-caste *jati*, it is equally tempting to read this as a spectacle of what some postcolonial readers might regard as a performance of subaltern agency. After all, the Sweepers seem to arrive at the palace of their own accord and are also permitted to participate in what might otherwise appear to be a festival held primarily for the interests of its *dwija*-translated, twice-born *varnic* participants (i.e., Godbole, the Rajah and “his people”). Most importantly, the Sweepers demonstrate that they actually can speak by singing out loud without any form of physical restraint and with the tools (“sieves”) that are otherwise associated with their caste occupation. In fact, one might argue that their performance signifies a radical appropriation of the festival according to their own interests, and that they have used this ritual to express a collective feeling of low-caste empowerment (“the air of a victorious army”).

These counterarguments are tempting because they seductively appeal to Bakhtinian, postcolonial, and other similar reading strategies that are critical of class, colonialism, and other systems of dominance. The critique I present here is not of those theoretical traditions in themselves so much as their limits for engaging the *varnic* traces within an event such as that of the Sweeper’s procession. In my reading, the latter performance fails to disrupt the Circle – that is, the festival’s ritual order of *varnic* differences. As the narrator clearly states, “the God could not issue from His temple until the unclean Sweepers’ played their tune.” There is a cultural analogue to this particular custom in the Varkari tradition, where different devotional singing groups are known to carry palanquins of various ritual objects related to the traditions’ dominant icons, Tukaram

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31 The concept of “uncrowning” is characteristic of the rhetoric that Bakhtin uses to theorize the carnivalesque in *Rabelais and His World*. For example, “Debasement and interment are reflected in carnival uncrownings, related to blows and abuse. The king’s attributes are turned upside down in the clown; he is the king of a world “turned inside out” (370).

32 John McBratney makes a persuasive case for reading the Sweepers as subalterns who, contrary to Spivak’s thesis in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, do in fact find their voice and sense of agency through their distinctive use of orality in a colonial world where Western modes of writing are prevalent as the dominant means of knowledge production.
and Jnandev, while making their way to a temple in the pilgrimage centre of Pandharpur, Maharashtra. Contemporary Marathi translator Philip C. Engblom touches on this tradition briefly in his introduction to D. B. Mokashi’s *Palkhi*, an Indian Pilgrimage: “the *dindis* (the traveling *bhajan* group) of the former untouchables had always walked ahead of the actual *palkhi* procession” (7). The positioning of these *dindis* carries a paradoxical logic of including the lower-caste Varkaris within the pilgrimage procession while keeping them simultaneously contained, disciplined, and arguably controlled within a space dictated by upper-caste desires. This logic is similarly operative in Forster’s representation of the Sweepers’ procession and in ways that produce two related acts of ritual performativity.

First, the Sweepers’ identity is translated according to the *varnic* hierarchy of purity and pollution. We can debate over whether this act of translation constitutes the Sweepers as *Shudras* or as a fifth caste of *avarnic* “untouchables” (given that they are literally positioned outside the palace and further distanced from the temple). Either way, it is clear that they are positioned in the narrative as being marginalized among the least pure/most polluted of Hindu subjects within the festival.

The second act of ritual performativity is one that translates the totality of the festival at a more symbolic level of meaning. Again, the Sweepers’ literal purpose is to lead the procession. This image might be visually illustrated as a line of continuity, stretching from the absolute purity of the God to the absolute pollution of the Sweepers. However, it is possible to go one step further and read this line allegorically within a sphere or Circle of tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces. Each *varnic* subject – Godbole, the Rajah, the “people,” and the Sweepers – is uniformly oriented to the pull of the temple’s space of absolute purity (i.e., the “God” on the temple altar). At the same time, each subject is centrifugally pushed away from that focal point. In each case, the distance of the subject is measured according to a scale of *varnic* differences and in ways where one might imagine each *varnic* position spatially on a ring that orbits around the central point of absolute purity. The Circle of the festival thus accommodates a non-dualistic culture of centripetal Vedantic oneness that is simultaneously ordered through centrifugal *varnic* differences. As the narrative of the festival continues, it is evident that
the Circle is capacious enough to accommodate other less pure, varnic subjects. This is evident when the procession arrives at the local jail to perform the ritual whereby a prisoner is released for no other reason but to demonstrate the reciprocal power of bhakti and God’s “Infinite Love” (287). However, the significance of the ritual has as much to do with Hindu theology as it does with the spatial orderings of the festival: “the God had extended his temple” (295). The interiority of the “temple” is thus figuratively evoked in the world outside the palace as one more ring is added to the centripetal-centrifugal order of the Circle.

From this perspective, the actions of the Sweepers and the released prisoners do not represent a carnivalesque reversal of social order so much as a reconstitution of the Circle’s ritual order. While the class status of these characters tempts us to interpret them as subaltern figures, their songs do not constitute acts of agency through voice. These songs are affective and devotional, but they are also sounded as performative affirmations of the Circle and their place of centripetal-centrifugal subjection within it. A more “secular” discourse of their experiences and political consciousness otherwise remains silent in the narrative, and in ways that are presaged by the muted appearance of the “punkah-wallah” in the “Caves” episode of Aziz’s trial.

It should be noted that the words varna and jati are never actually used in A Passage to India. However, there are signs to show that Forster is more attentive to the nuances of these two concepts than his Orientalist or Indophobic predecessors. For writers like Sir William Jones, James Mill, and G. W. F. Hegel, varna and jati are generally conflated under the single sign of “caste”. In the case of Forster, there are at least three sets of Hindu characters for whom their caste identity is stated explicitly in A Passage to India: Godbole and his fellow “Deccani Brahmans”; the Sweepers’ Band; and the “Untouchable” punkah-wallah. It is interesting that the latter two groups are identified on the basis of their occupational practice. While the eye of the narrator attempts to

33 There are actually two Sweeper communities in the novel, one that exists in Mau and the other in Chandrapore. The latter are mentioned during the episode of Aziz’s trial when they go on strike as an act of protest to his arrest (202). It should also be noted that this incident is staged more directly as a critique of colonialism than of upper-caste Hindu oppression.
romanticize the lowliness of these groups – most obviously in the aestheticization of the punkah-wallah as a “beautiful naked god” – the narrator also demonstrates some consciousness of how these groups are regarded by their own society within the novel (217). The punkah-wallah is “condemned” as a person of “low birth” (205) and the Sweepers are of the “filth” (291). In both cases, these descriptions arguably function as signs of pollution and therefore mark each group’s position on what I have suggested in my theoretical framework as the “y-axis” of varnic subjectivity; the “x-axis” signs of jati are otherwise found in the references to occupation. Although Forster’s engagement with caste does not go so far as to explore acts of lower-caste mobility or anti-caste resistance, the caste identities of his characters are not entirely static either because they do undergo acts of performative translation where their occupational identities are signified as ritual status; the case of the Rajah becoming a Kshatriya is another example of this.

In the case of Godbole, the translational relationship between occupation and ritual performance is complex because although he is regarded (by Aziz) according to his fictional jati as a “Deccani Brahman”, the narrator’s reason for explaining Godbole’s dominant role in the festival has mostly to do with his employment: “As Minister of Education, he gained this special honour” (270). Brahminism has a history of association with certain religious and cultural notions of pedagogical or scholarly authority (i.e., the role of the guru, the privilege of Sanskrit literacy, etc.), but it is worthwhile to dissociate Godbole’s ministerial role from his jati identity, if only to a small extent, in order to further develop our understanding of the festival as an allegorical Circle of translational varnic becoming. Godbole belongs to a Brahmin jati community by the mere fact of his birth, but he becomes a figure of ritual authority on the basis of his occupational privilege in the everyday life of Mau – the world of the palace and thus the world displaced outside the temple. This act of varnic becoming is also self-initiated – an act of self-translation – and thus it is performed by Gobole as an act of duty: that is, of dharmic fulfillment. The conceit of varna and dharma in Godbole’s performance throughout the festival episode brings to mind a similar conceptual relationship within the Neo-Vedantic discourse of varnashramadharma.
The varnic translation of the Rajah into a Kshatriya, and both the Sweepers and the prisoner as the least pure of all Hindu participants can also be read along similar lines of dharma and ritual duty. All such translations are arguably foreshadowed early on in the “Temple” section when the narrator scans the interior life of the festival space:

Hindus sat on either side of the carpet where they could find room, or overflowed into the adjoining corridors and the courtyard – Hindus, Hindus only, mild-featured men, mostly villagers, for whom anything outside their villages passed in a dream. They were the toiling ryot, whom some called the real India. Mixed with them sat a few tradesmen out of the little town, officials, courtiers, scions of the ruling house. Schoolboys kept inefficient order. (269-70)

The passage is structured to highlight cultural differences in perspective and space. By identifying the participants as exclusively “Hindu”, the narrator opens the passage with an outsider’s perspective. However, this perspective suddenly gives way to that of an insider as the narrator provides detailed references to the participants’ occupational identities. These references also appear to be laid out according to the four-fold scheme of chaturvarna in ascending order: “toiling ryot” (Shudra); “tradesmen” (Vaishya); and the “officials, courtiers, scions of the ruling house” (Kshatriya). The absence of a potential Brahmin subject is conspicuous and the literal reason for this is that Godbole and his “choir” have yet to arrive on the scene. Yet, this absence can also be read ambiguously as a symbol for the sublimity of the Brahm in subject. This is not to elevate Godbole so much as recognize the varnic power of anyone who performs the dharma of the highest ritual authority and thus sees to it that all other participants are similarly translated according to their respective roles of ritual duty. Due to the structure of the passage, the sublime absence of the Brahmin is Janus-faced. Positioned within the space between the last two sentences, this absence speaks as much to Godbole’s conceptual role as a Brahmin within the chaturvarnic order of occupational identities, but also according to the second translation of the Brahmin as a guru-like figure of pedagogical authority whose dharma is to discipline the “inefficient order” of the “schoolboys”. Just as the varnic assembly of the “the toiling ryot”, the “tradesmen”, and the ruling “officials, courtiers” and “scions” foreshadows the Circle of varnic becoming within the festival,
the relationship between a would-be guru and the “schoolboys” foreshadows the encounter between Godbole and Aziz, and the former’s coded offer to take the latter as his disciple. This encounter will be explored more fully in the last section of this chapter.

Thus, contrary to the views of Forster’s scholarly readers, it is evident that the “cleavage” of caste in both varnic and dharmic terms does play a strong role in the narrative of the Gokul Ashtami episode, and in ways that run counter to the more explicit discourse on brahman-ical oneness that remains a strong point of appeal for Forster’s scholarly readers. The symbolic concept of the festival as a Circle of Indianness in its metaphysical as well as varnic form also echoes many of the ideals within Neo-Vedantic thought and its grand narrative of varnashramadharma in particular; it foregrounds the trope of centripetality that is common to other works of Indutva fiction as well.

That said, it is worth noting that there are some subtle differences between Forster’s varnic vision and that of Neo-Vedanta. Firstly, Forster’s vision is undeniably hierarchical, and it is rationalized as so through the shared rhetoric of devotion (bhakti) and non-dualist oneness (brahman). Secondly, this vision is narrated with a tone of ambivalence. The narrator suggests a sense of awe for the festival’s spirit of oneness and particularly for its inclusion of the “toiling ryot”, the Sweepers and other such representations of the “real India”, but there is also an awareness of hierarchy and power. As has been suggested throughout this section, these power relations are largely characterized in Brahminical, varnic terms, but it is also clear that this expression of power as such is not portrayed as exploitive, oppressive or violent – at least not in the ways that are foregrounded in Arundhati Roy’s discourse of Touchable subjectivity in The God of Small Things. Instead, this expression of power centers around a different trope of Indianness: that is, the concept of the impersonal as a mode of desire, duty (dharma) and devotion (bhakti). The next section of this chapter will explore Forster’s handling of this trope further through two incidents that might otherwise be read as ritual acts of transgression: Godbole’s mud-smear and his trance-like vision of communion with the spirit of Mrs. Moore. This section will also problematize the political aspects of the impersonal in relation to the cultural history of vernacular bhakti and Forster’s non-fictional accounts of the Gokul Ashtami in The Hill of Devi.
2.5 Sanskritization, *Bhakti*, and the Politics of the Impersonal

Godbole’s mud-smear takes place just after the climax of the festival, when the temple procession arrives at the river and the participants place various ritual objects on a tray before immersing them in the waters. As the narrator observes, “the tray returned to Professor Godbole, who picked up a fragment of the mud adhering and smeared it on his forehead without much ceremony” (300). In the novel’s earlier sections, mud is characterized as a potential taboo for two different religious worldviews. For the colonial Christian cosmology of Sorley and Graysford, “mud” is denied a place in heaven (34). Given what we know of *varna* and the y-axis of ritual purity within the Brahminical Hindu context, the mud becomes doubly significant as a potential pollutant and especially so for someone like Godbole who displays an anxiety with almost all acts of touch throughout the novel. Yet, in the Gokul Ashtami episode, the mud is touched and the act thus constitutes another scene of possible “muddle” that fails to make sense. The mud-smear is described as lacking “ceremony”, but this is arguably a description from the perspective of an outsider subject. For Forster’s insider, the visual aspects of Godbole’s smear evoke the Hindu practice of using vermillion or tumeric as *tilak* or *tikka* to mark one’s forehead during the course of a ritual. It can also be read ambiguously: the mud might be taken ideally as an object of purity because of its contiguity with the ritual objects that have been immersed in the river; and it can be read conversely as a pollutant, yet one that Godbole touches in a gesture of both hospitality and containment as well as intimacy and subordination. Ultimately, for me, it is through the paradoxes of the latter that the significance of Godbole’s mud smear is most persuasive.

These paradoxes are arguably no less present for the conditions that presuppose the Rajah and the Sweepers’ ritual translation into *varnic* subjects. Like the mud, they are included in the ritual life of the festival, but they are also kept to their own respective *varnic* place within its Circular order. In this context, it is also worth remembering Fielding’s discourse on aesthetics, beauty, harmony, and the lack of all such qualities in India because of how “in poor India everything was placed wrong” – a discourse that serves a prelude to the Gokul Ashtami episode. As Godbole’s mud-smear marks the anti-climax of the Gokul Ashtami episode, it speaks back to Fielding’s discourse: everything has a
dharmic and therefore “rightful” place in the Circle of Indianness. Yet, every such place is subject to the Circle’s paradoxical order of hospitality and containment, intimacy and subordination, and ultimately of centripetality and centrifugality. The effect is thus a harmony of sublime order, where order exists, but is veiled off by muddled displays as well as by the festival’s rhetorical spirit of oneness. This mode of harmony is never presented as a system of violence or oppression for those on the receiving end (i.e., the Sweepers), but it is evidently restrictive for all involved, including Godbole.

There are two cultural analogues for Godbole’s mud-smear, both of which highlight the key aspects of its unique will to power. The first of these is in the Hindu myth of Ganga, the goddess who personifies the famous river and pilgrimage centre of north India. Ganga’s descent from the heavens to Earth is facilitated through the hospitality of Shiva, who receives her in the locks of his hair and later releases her from this momentary state of containment – that is, at his own will, rather than Ganga’s (Eck 2012 176). The second analogue for Godbole’s mud-smear is in the contemporaneous case of Rabindranath Tagore’s Bengali novel, Gora. The novel’s eponymous protagonist is an orphan of English parentage raised by an upper-class Bengali family and as an adult, he reacts aggressively against the liberalism of the Brahmo Samaj movement by adopting a strict, orthodox, Brahminical, yet anti-colonial and populist-minded, outlook. Early on in the novel, he creates a controversial spectacle when he returns from a “bathing festival at Tribeni” with “a caste-mark of Ganges clay on his forehead” – one that intentionally offends his Brahmo Samaj audience (52). If we read Godbole’s self-anointment with the mud from the twin-perspectives of the Ganga myth and Gora, the gesture is thus doubly significant as an expression of gendered control (where the mud, with its origins in the earth, is similarly feminized in its containment on a masculine body, and specifically upon the shared topos of the head) as well as a symbolic recovery of imagined Brahminical subjectivity and authority in a modern age. As a result, the mud-smear loses its transgressive significance when it is re-read this way as a demonstration of power, albeit in a seemingly non-aggressive form.

This paradox of power is also illustrated through Godbole’s trance-like experience of erotic communion with both the spirit of Mrs. Moore and the wasp (which he is said to
have loved “equally”) (272). As with the mud, the wasp and Moore are potential objects of religious taboo: the former is excluded from Sorely and Graysford’s worldview; and the latter’s membership in British society positions her on the margins of a jati-based, caste Hindu society (perhaps as a mleccha)\(^\text{34}\) and thus, she is technically no less “Untouchable” than the punkah-wallah. Moore’s sense of ritual status is also complicated by the fact that she appears here as spirit – that is, the spirit of a dead, and therefore taboo, body. For *Manu*, corpses are viewed negatively as objects that require those who touch them to undergo a ritual of purification, but as we see below, Moore’s spirit is approached by Godbole as a body devoid of taboo: “He was a Brahman, she Christian, but it made no difference… It was his duty, as it was his desire, to place himself in the position of the God and to love her, and to place himself in her position and to say to the God, ‘come, come, come, come…” (272). Godbole expresses his love for Mrs. Moore according to the dual roles of *bhakti* devotionalism. He assumes the *saguna brahman* role of the loving divinity and the role of the passionate devotee who calls on the God-lover to “come, come, come, come” while knowing (as Godbole states earlier on in the novel) that He always “neglects to come” due to the very nature of his *nirgunic* sublimity (73). By playing both roles simultaneously, Godbole engages an ideally non-dualist relationship between these two modes of *bhakti* poetics: “love in union (*sambhoga*)” and “love in separation (*vipralambha*)” (Mishra 20). In a Neo-Vedantic reading of the scene, any such evocation of non-dualism arguably signifies an affirmation of *brahman* as a universal, yet distinctly Hindu or Indian, principle. Godbole’s trance also validates the argument for *bhakti* as an ideal path to the realization of this universal truth, and especially so through the tropological relationship of *saguna brahman* to *nirgunic* modes of awareness and being. Yet, the limit of this Neo-Vedantic reading is such that it necessitates a negation of the personal. It is strictly through an *impersonal* mode of being that Godbole permits himself to love, worship, and most importantly, touch the otherwise taboo bodies of Moore’s spirit and the wasp, and this is no less true for his contact with the mud. Conversely, it is through an impersonal mode

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\(^{34}\) In his reading of the same scene, McBratney categorizes the British colonials as *mlecchas* because they are “foreigners” and therefore “outside the caste system” (125).
that Moore’s spirit and the wasp are kept to their place of intimacy and containment within the harmony of the Circle.

The trope of the impersonal is also a sign for the limits of the festival, and this limit as such is partly highlighted at the level of dharma. The narrator tells us that Godbole expresses his love for Mrs. Moore as an act of “duty” as well as “desire”, but the larger narrative of Godbole’s actions show that these concepts are not separate in his mind or his actions. In all cases, Godbole’s sense of duty is varnic and the fulfillment of his Brahmin dharma is therefore a matter of impersonal desire; he performs out of his own free will, but his actions are grounded in reasons that extend to the vitality of the festival and its allegorical significance as a Circle of metaphysical oneness and ritual order.

While the narrator never really takes us as deep into the consciousness of another character within the festival, there is the small suggestion that the other participants face similar limits and restrictions. The varnic translations of the Rajah and the Sweepers register on an impersonal level of varnic subjectivity, having less to do with their jati-birth than with the dharmic fulfillment of their ritual duties. These limits are also enunciated more generally for all ritual acts of bodily or physical intimacy: i.e., the licking of butter off each other’s noses and the smearing of “greasy rice and milk” over “one another’s mouth” (275). As the narrator hints, the festival is not “an orgy of the body; the tradition of the shrine forbade it” (273). What prevents these rituals from being performed or read as an “orgy” is the assurance that they too are motivated by feelings of impersonal desire. In this way, the potentially transgressive qualities of such acts are completely diminished.

Like the “cleavage” of caste-as-varna, the expression of impersonal desire reveals the limits of the festival’s perceived utopian ideality. The festival is imagined as having the capacity to include what appears to be an infinite range of socio-economic differences as well as cultural behaviours (practical jokes, intimacies with nature and the body, etc.). However, there is one thing that appears to have no place in the Circle: the expression of personal desire. This lack is also what distinguishes the intercultural relationship between Godbole and Moore from that of Fielding and Aziz. The latter is presented distinctly at the novel’s climax as an object of personal desire: “‘‘Why can’t we be friends
now?” said [Fielding], holding [Aziz] affectionately. “It’s what I want. It’s what you want” (306). The contrast of the two relationships gives each of them their tragicomic character: for Aziz and Fielding, personal desire exists, but it remains unconsummated due to the surrounding context of colonial politics; for Godbole and Moore’s spirit, intimacy is permissible, but it has been sought in an impersonal manner and in ways that are restricted to the ritual temporality of the festival, the space of Godbole’s trance-like consciousness, the structural paradigms of dharma and bhakti – the sum of which signifies Indianness.

In Neo-Vedantic discourse, the negation of the personal is never regarded as an act of repression, injustice or violence – not even for the sake of counterargument. Instead, it is rhetorically upheld as an ideal and largely so for the sake of seductively affirming the metaphysics that privilege nirguna brahman as the ultimate reality of impersonal oneness among all living things. My reasons for highlighting the impersonal as a trope of Indianness derives partly from my own scholarly experience of confronting it throughout all of the key texts of this dissertation and subsequently being forced to challenge my own personal awareness of the power dynamics within Hinduism, Brahminism, Sanskritization, and bhakti in particular.

When I first began researching the literary representation of bhakti in modern English fiction, Forster’s engagement with Tukaram and the Varkari tradition was to serve as the starting point of my work. I was intrigued with the latter precisely because it contradicted so much of what I had previously studied as well as personally observed of bhakti in various historical and regional contexts (including my family’s history as devotees of Shirdi Sai Baba, a mystic based in Maharashtra at the turn of the twentieth century). In most studies of pan-regional, pre-colonial bhakti, the definition of the term is generally consistent with Vijay Mishra’s theory of bhakti as a “break” from classical Hinduism,

35 I stress “pan-regional” because, in my research experience, scholarly discussions of regional bhakti tend to offer more complex historiographies (such as Karen Pechilis Prentiss’ focus on Tamil traditions in The Embodiment of Bhakti). One possible reason for this is that such studies of regional bhakti are more occupied with the particulars of a given religious tradition, rather than with grand narratives of trans-historical, civilizational Indianess.
where “a predominantly intellectual and ritualistic religion shifted its religious practices to incorporate the concept of loving communion with a personal God” (5). However, for modern translators of bhakti poetry like Dilip Chitre and A. K. Ramanujan, these post-Vedic, yet pre-colonial, traditions have a radical history based on reasons that go beyond the popular, non-priestly worship of the divine in a saguna form. Many of these traditions emerged as an expression of vernacular culture and in ways that signified a centrifugal tension with the Sanskrit canon: for example, the use of Tamil by the Alvar poets, Kannada by the Virasaivas, Marathi by the Varkaris, and various forms of Hindustani by Kabir and Mirabai. The intentional use of these languages empowered non-Brahmin poets (including women and members of the marginalized castes) to express themselves and it also granted them a radical form of agency to a diverse audience that could access the poetry and then practice as well as further innovate new forms of religiosity in languages that were relatively close to their everyday, and thus personal, lives. The personal aspects of vernacular bhakti were also significant at the level of genre, authorship, and literary form. All of the aforementioned bhakti poets deployed a signature line to explicitly indicate their authorship. By contrast, Sanskrit works like the Vedas are often praised because they have no author or else because (as in the case of Manu) the work is not viewed as one of individual self-expression; the latter are thus praised as works of impersonal expression. Finally, in some cases (such as the Virasaivas), the radical character of bhakti sparked the development of social and political ideologies for casteless, non-Sanskritic religious communities. As Ramanujan admits in Speaking of Siva, these latter ideals are tenuous and have been historically subject to various forms of Sanskritization, but that does not diminish or erase the radical significance of the personal as a concept and one that informs other aspects of non-Brahminical thought and religious practice. The radical significance of the personal is particularly important for my reading of The God of Small Things, where the process of de-personalization is allegorized as a form of violence that lies at the heart of Indianness. As a result, the concept of the personal becomes significant as a form of resistance and thus the basis of a counter-Indutva narrative.

In the case of A Passage to India, the politics of the impersonal over the personal prompts us to consider how this dominantly impersonal view of bhakti is de-radicalized within the
novel and what this means for the novel’s larger narrative of Indianness. In his fictional treatment of Tukaram, Forster’s narrator shows a self-reflexive awareness of how the festival departs from the Varkari tradition when the poet’s name is highlighted as an object of devotion rather than as a devotional poet. What remains conspicuous is the complete absence of any reference to Tukaram’s radical history: the scandals and persecutions he endured from his Brahmin contemporaries for being a non-Brahmin, vernacular poet; and his attempt to protest them and the caste system as a whole by throwing his writings in a river on the promise that the deity Vithala would restore it and thus prove the legitimacy of his bhakti.36 Forster’s omission of this history is indicative of how Tukaram’s biography has been generally Sanskritized over the centuries, but it is worth considering the extent to which Forster himself participates in his own acts of Sanskritization through his narrative of the Gokul Ashtami episode as a scene of impersonal Indianness.

With regards to the festival, the strongest examples of Sanskritization lie chiefly in the characterization of Godbole as its dominant subject and as the primary vehicle through which Sanskritic forms of knowledge (Neo-Vedanta, varna and dharma) are performatively brought into being throughout the episode. One might argue that Godbole’s presence as a Brahminical figure of ritual authority and impersonal duty is also more or less a reflection of the “real India” as it was at the time of Forster’s writing – that is, a realist reflection of Indianness, and one that stands in sharp contrast to the more supposedly secular, casteless modernity of present, postcolonial India. However, if we return to The Hill of Devi, it is interesting to see how Forster’s fictional vision of the Gokul Ashtami differs from his own personal experience of attending the festival while stationed in the princely state of Dewas during the early twenties. In one of his letters, Forster writes,

It is (or was) celebrated throughout India, often under the name of Jamnashtami – the Eight Days of the Birth. But I have never heard of it being celebrated so

36 This aspect of Tukaram’s biography is foregrounded in Chitre’s introduction to his English translation of the poet’s work in Says Tuka.
sumptuously. It had been appropriated and worked up by the Dewas dynasty. Priests took little part in it, the devout were in direct contact with their god, emotion meant more than ritual. (116-117)

As we have seen in this chapter, the reverse is true for A Passage to India: the priest – as symbolized in the varnic mould of Godbole – plays a central role, and it is through his gestures that ritual practice is not only valued over emotion, but the overflow of love, ecstasy and oneness finds its limits within the impersonal and varnic conditions of the rituals.

It should also be noted that while the novel positions Godbole as the central character of the festival episode – the only Hindu participant with a proper name – The Hill of Devi shows that position of privilege being held solely by the Maharajah of Dewas, the king to whom Forster served as a personal secretary. Like Godbole, the Maharajah comes across partly as a Dionysian figure; during the festival, he is said to have been so intoxicated with devotion that “he danced like King David before the altar” (117). He is also a proponent of both bhakti and Vedanta. However, unlike Godbole, the Maharajah belongs to a non-Brahmin jati, one that apparently shares a lineage with the first Maratha emperor, Shivaji. The latter detail is offered in Forster’s brief overview of Maratha imperial history:

There has always been a contest between the Brahmins (who were once powerful as Peshwas) and the dynasties that sprang from the founder of the Maratha empire. Sivaji [sic], a great warrior and belonging to a low caste, believed in bhakti, in our union with the divine through love. The Maharajah of Dewas, not a great warrior, believed in it too. (117)

However, unlike Godbole, the Maharajah of Dewas did not take on the varnic responsibilities of a Vedic ritual authority whose power lay in his performative abilities to stimulate the varnic translation of the other participants; this also marks the

37 However, on this point, the Maharajah’s display of vigor and vitality stands in sharp contrast to Forster’s fictional image of Mau’s dying Rajah.
Maharajah’s disregard for the Vedic notion of *varnic* hierarchy. The latter is somewhat affirmed by the Maharajah’s own unique approach to *bhakti* and Vedanta: “he would condemn asceticism, declare that salvation could not be reached through it, that it *might* be Vedantic but it was not Vedic, and matter and spirit must be given their due” (my italics 116). The Maharajah espouses a monistic philosophy, but the admission of Vedanta as merely one possible discourse for articulating it demonstrates the lack of a strong doctrinal belief. By contrast, Godbole is constructed in the novel as being philosophically committed to both Vedanta and *bhakti*, and specifically the latter as a path to the impersonal reality of the former. As discussed previously in section 2.2, this belief is cryptically articulated in Godbole’s discourse on the non-dualism of good and evil. It is reiterated again in the “Temple” section through his critical response to Aziz’s poems on “internationality”: “‘Ah, that is bhakti; ah, my young friend, that is different and very good… May I translate this particular one into Hindi? In fact, it *might* be rendered into Sanskrit almost, it is so enlightened’” (my italics 279). In my reading of this exchange, Godbole’s appraisal of “internationality” seems to carry a positive tone because it represents a non-dualistic, and therefore impersonal (*nirguna*), oneness of nations, but it also represents a centripetal affirmation of Sanskritic knowledge and its universalist pull. Aziz’s use of a vernacular language “might” enable a tropological relationship with that knowledge, but Godbole otherwise idealizes Sanskrit as the true medium of an untranslatable, sublime ideal and this too departs from the “radical” dimensions of pre-colonial, vernacular *bhakti*.

In his unforgiving critique of *A Passage to India*, the early postcolonial Indian writer Nirad C. Chaudhuri criticized Forster’s treatment of Godbole and Hinduism in general as both anachronistic and offensive:

> In regard to the Hindu characters, he relied mostly on the types found in the Princely States. Certainly they were more traditional than those in British India, but they were so traditional that they did not represent modern India at all. For instance, to those of us who are familiar with the teachings of the Hindu reformers of the 19th century, Godbole is not an exponent of Hinduism, he is a clown. (72)
However, as we have seen in this section, there are strong differences between Godbole and “the types found in the Princely States”, given Forster’s own personal experience with the Maharajah of Dewas in The Hill of Devi. By contrast, there are in fact stronger similarities between Godbole and “Hindu reformers” like Vivekananda, Gandhi, and other historical figures in their commitment to the religious modernity of Neo-Vedanta. I argue the latter despite the fact that I am unable to find any strong evidence that Forster was deeply engaged with that intellectual project. Whether or not such evidence exists, the argument here is that Forster’s construction of Godbole’s Brahminism, his Sanskritized approach to bhakti, his impersonal sense of duty-as-desire, and his seemingly non-violent will to power has its basis in the non-realist realm of fictional imagination. It is also in this realm that Forster envisions Godbole and the festival as a whole within an essentialist, narrative of Indianness.

However, Forster’s Indutva narrative is marked by a tone of ambivalence, rather than a straightforward celebration of utopian Indianness. The motivations behind his ambivalence arguably have to do with a moral imperative to address the festival’s subtle, yet significant, limits: the hierarchy of varna and the impersonal fulfillment of desire-as-dharma. As a self-proclaimed liberal humanist, Forster would never have shown a blind eye to the power dynamics of the former and the lack of individual freedom in the latter.

The next section explores Forster’s ambivalence further by examining the relationship between the festival and the world outside as an allegory for the confrontation between the idea of Indianness (as symbolized by the festival) and the Hegelian ideal of History (as represented by both the world and knowledge-systems outside it). As previously discussed in section 1.4, there are precedents in Neo-Vedantic thought for deploying the rhetoric of History as a trope of Western modernity and therefore a civilizational antithesis of Indianness. This tropology recurs in the Indutva narratives of The Serpent and the Rope and The God of Small Things, albeit with distinctive variations. What is unique about the idea of History in Forster is that it serves to characterize the festival allegorically not as civilizational ideal but as an inaccessible, untranslatable heterotopia.
of Indianness. This heterotopia is also characterized through the motif of the veil,\(^{38}\) which enables the exegesis of a second allegorical Circle of ritual time within the “Temple” section of *A Passage to India*. As with the previous discussion on the first allegorical Circle of *varnic* oneness, the next section will examine how Forster’s handling of the veil challenges a conventional postcolonial reading of the Gokul Ashtami episode, particularly for its anti-Hegelian signs of nonsense and repetition. Finally, this section will look at how the figurative concept of a veil serves to articulate that same set of absolute differences that were introduced in section 2.1: the outsider-observer and the insider-participant. The latter dichotomy of space and perspective is supplemented below with one of temporality: the displacement of History to the outside and the festival’s ritualistic repetition of Indianness from deep inside the temple.

### 2.6 Circle II: Heterotopia and the Veils of Indianness

The trope of History is introduced to the Gokul Ashtami episode through the course of a commentary that immediately follows the ritual of Krishna’s symbolic birth:

> the human spirit had tried by a desperate contortion to ravish the unknown, flinging down science and history in the struggle, yes, beauty herself. Did it succeed? Books written afterwards say ‘Yes.’ But how, if there is such an event, can it be remembered afterwards? How can it be expressed in anything but itself? Not only from the unbeliever are mysteries hid, but the adept himself cannot retain them. He may think, if he chooses, that he has been with God, but, as soon as he thinks it, it becomes history, and falls under the rules of time. (273)

Forster’s rhetoric of God refers to the “mysteries” of “the unknown”, but it is also a trope for the Vedantic concept of *brahman*-ical oneness, which is no less evoked through the narrative of *nirguna* to *saguna* descent (“Infinite Love took upon itself the form of SHRI

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\(^{38}\) This engagement with figurative representations of veils in Forster’s “Temple” is partly inspired by J. Hillis Miller’s exploration of repeated acts of unveiling in “Heart of Darkness Revisited.”
KRISHNA”), the declaration of universal regeneration (“All sorrow was annihilated, not only for Indians, but for foreigners, birds, caves, railways and the stars; all became joy, all laughter”) and more literally, the affective feeling of trans-individual, yet highly impersonal, oneness that pervades the collectivity of the festival’s participants at the height of the festival (273). As Vijay Mishra might argue, all such aspects of brahmanical revelation are of the sublime, and they register chiefly in the realm of inward experience. This realm lies beyond observation and it also eludes its preservation in writing or any other such form of linguistic signification. In other words, it is signified in the realm of silence.39 That said, the emphasis of the passage above is curiously less on the futility of language than of “history” and its “rules of time”. The rhetoric of the latter is partly grounded on the relationship between History and reason that is dominant in Hegel. Thus, where Hegel critiques Hinduism (and India by extension) as being incapable of writing History, Forster re-imagines History as being incapable of recording the totality of all that is revealed in the festival. History and the authority of Hegel as well as other grand narrators of Western modernity are thus provincialized.

This grand, anti-Hegelian reversal is also supplemented with a pluralistic view of cultural temporality. The festival eludes History, but it is also imagined as operating according to its own “rules of time”. This is suggested in the lines that frame the ritual event of the Krishna’s symbolic revelation: “In a land where all else was unpunctual, the hour of the Birth was chronometrically observed” (272). In the language of Hindu ritual practice, this “hour” is commonly understood as the muhurat or “auspicious moment” of any ritual event. In our contemporary world, a typical Vedic-Hindu wedding is comprised of multiple ceremonies, but a muhurat is often calculated by astrologers (who often belong to a Brahmin jati) to mark the auspiciousness of the central ritual; in my own personal case, a muhurat was determined (though not exactly observed) for the ritual of mutual

39 The view of absolute silence as the only true sign of brahman is not uncommon in Neo-Vedanta, and it is often reiterated by Raja Rao in his philosophical essays (1978; 1983; 1988) as well as by his protagonist in The Serpent and the Rope. This tropological view of silence might also explain Godbole’s minimal, and thus highly cryptic, use of words throughout A Passage to India.
garlanding between the bride and groom.\textsuperscript{40} In A Passage to India, the \textit{muhurat} of Krishna’s symbolic birth is authenticated less in terms of its astrological basis than on the grounds of how it is observed and recognized by the participants in the festival. Although there are signs of oneness that occur earlier in the episode, it is only when “the clock struck midnight” that those signs take on a more revelatory resonance (273). While the precision of the clock used in this fictional temple (or any such device in the early twentieth-century) is certainly grounds for secular skepticism, the deeper significance of the \textit{muhurat} is imagined in the novel as an object of ritual fulfillment. The exact moment of the \textit{muhurat} is less important than the assurance that it has been dutifully recognized and mostly so that the \textit{dharma} pertaining to the other rituals is fulfilled as well.

While it is evident that all of the festival’s participants are actively involved in recognizing the \textit{muhurat}, Forster’s narrator also places strong emphasis on the Brahmin subject as the primary agent of recognition. The most explicit sign of this is highlighted through the actions of an unnamed priest: “Three minutes before it was due, a Brahman brought forth a model of the village of Gokul… and placed it in front of the altar” (272). A subtler example is arguably demonstrated earlier on through Godbole. He “presses forward from the back” of the temple when he knows that it is time for him and his “choir” to take their “turn” in leading the \textit{bhajan} (270). A moment later, Godbole pauses and signals a shift in the music:

Godbole consulted the music-book, said a word to the drummer, who broke rhythm, made a think little blur of sound, and produced a new rhythm. This was more exciting, the inner images it evoked more definite, and the singers’ expressions became fatuous and languid. They loved all men… (271).

In both of these two gestures, Godbole performs his recognition of the festival’s auspicious moment and although the clock will sound its own recognition of the midnight

\textsuperscript{40} Although I have been unable to find any scholarly writings on the concept of \textit{muhurat} in Hindu ritual practice, I was astonished to find that the term is widely used in the supposedly “secular” discourse of Hindi or Bollywood cinema. As Satyajit Bhatkal writes in The Spirit of Lagaan, “The first shot or the \textit{muhurat} shot is to be taken after the traditional \textit{pooja} (religious) rites” of any film project (107).
moment, Godbole’s gestures arguably play a functional role in rousing the crowd towards that experience of ultimate oneness (“They loved all men”). As with the case of the unnamed priest, these gestures gain significance by the mere fact that they are performed before the arrival of the *muhurat*. Thus, where History is troped as being incapable of remembering the participants’ sublime experience of this particular moment in time, the Brahmin subject is casted (and thus caste-ed) as the one with an ability to intuit it in advance. This ability to recognize the *muhurat* of ritual time is not presented as a skill but as a subtle act of duty and therefore *dharma* and specifically of Brahmin *dharma* in *varnic* translation. By recognizing the *muhurat*, the Brahmin thus enables a larger revelation of *brahman*-ical oneness, not to mention the oneness of *varnic* order and thus the first allegorical Circle of Indianness within the festival episode.

The concept of *muhurat* in Forster’s imagination also represents a ritual technology of harmony which functions to produce order and thus keep all other rituals in their respective place within the festival, much in the same way that Godbole does with the mud, the wasp, and the spirit of Mrs. Moore. Again, the *muhurat* of Krishna’s birth stimulates a profound revelation of oneness, and this moment in time enables the performance of other ritual activities but also other ritual formations, all of which have their own *temporal* place in the festival: that is, they each have their own sense of *muhurat* (i.e., the auspicious moment of the naming ceremony, the Sweepers’ Band performance, the prisoner’s release, etc.). The *muhurat* of each ritual as such is also limited by the larger temporality of the Gokul Ashtami because the festival, like any festival, must end. Unsurprisingly, the festival signals this auspicious moment of closure through the means of ritual performance:

Whatever had happened had happened, and while the intruders picked themselves up the crowds of Hindus began a desultory move back into the town. The image went back too, and on the following day underwent a private death of its own, when some curtains of magenta and green were lowered in front of the dynastic shrine…. (300)
This act of re-veil-ation relates literally to the ritual concealment of ritual objects within the temple, but it can also be read figuratively as a dissolution of what was previously allegorized as the first Circle of impersonal, hierarchical, and monistic varnic space. The re-veil-ation of the temple is the ritual moment of the first Circle’s dissolution; it is difficult to find concrete evidence in the novel that the continuity of this Circle actually constitutes a social ethos or economic basis for the everyday life of Mau that resumes once the Gokul Ashtami is over. Thus, the logical conclusion is that this final act of ritual closure furthers an inside-outside distinction between the ritual temporality of the Circle and the secular temporality of everyday life in Mau, not to mention that of colonial modernity and Hegelian History by extension. It is through the motif of the veil – the “curtains of magenta and the green” – that these spatio-temporal differences of the inside and the outside are imagined as being preserved without breach.

This set of distinctions also serves to remind us that while the Gokul Ashtami is imagined as an essentialist symbol of Indianness (as evidenced by the tropes of brahman, varna, dharma, the impersonal, etc.), it is clearly not presented as an ideal of utopian perfection. For the narrator, it still has its social “problems” – most notably its Brahminical privileging of caste hierarchy and impersonal being. The festival also highlights a different set of limits – the limits of time – and largely so through the restrictions of muhurat and ritual temporality. As a result, the allegorical space of the Circle is restricted to a specific space of time – from revelation to re-veil-ation – and the festival consequently takes on the character of a heterotopia.

In “Of Other Spaces”, Michel Foucault defines the concept of heterotopia partly through its contrast with the concept of utopia. Of the latter, Foucault argues, “[u]topias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfect form, or else society turned upside down” (24). By contrast, heterotopias are places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia, in which the
real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. (24)

In the case of Forster’s Gokul Ashtami, the festival almost appears utopian because it embodies many of the ideals of civilizational Indianness that one finds in Neo-Vedantic discourse. However, it is through the festival’s tense relationship – its contiguity as well as its contrast – with the outside world of Mau, modernity, and History that the festival takes on the heterotopic character of a counter-site and more specifically, as an Indutva expression of counter-modernity.

It is worth noting that festivals do figure into Foucault’s examples of heterotopia. He writes, “there are those linked, on the contrary, to time in its most fleeting, transitory, precarious aspect, to time in the mode of the festival. These heterotopias are not oriented to the eternal, they are rather absolutely temporal” (26). In other words, a festival comes and it goes. In the case of a religious event like the Gokul Ashtami, the festival also comes back and thus it is more accurate to say that its temporality is oriented to cyclical modes of repetition rather than a stasis of eternal, utopian being. Thus, while the spatial Circle of oneness and varnic order dissolves in the closing rituals of re-veal-ation, a second allegorical Circle of recurrent, ritual temporality is remembered into being. This latter Circle of ritual time is also a symbol of power. Conventionally, one might assume that the totality of the festival is kept in its place by restricting its rituals to a muhurat of no more than eight days a year. However, in this reading of Forster’s fictional Gokul Ashtami, the system of temporal order is reversed and it is arguably the festival that keeps the temporalities of Mau, modernity, and History contained to their place and thus on the outside of this counter-modern Circle of recurrent, ritual time.

This Circle of temporal Indianness is imagined as exercising a sovereign-like presence throughout the festival, if not the novel as a whole; this is illustrated as such through three separate instances. The first lies in the political decision made by Mau’s palace elites to keep the news of the Rajah’s death a secret from the festivals’ participants out of fear that it might disrupt the flow of the festival. As the narrator notes, “death interrupts” and [i]t interrupted less here than in Europe” because “religion is a living force to the
Hindus, and can at certain moments fling down everything that is petty and temporary in their natures” (289). The festival’s disengagement with the secular realm is also enunciated in the opening of the Gokul Ashtami episode, when the narrator describes the festival’s participants as “villagers, for whom anything outside their villages passed in a dream” (270). In this case, the “outside” might refer to the world of colonial modernity that lies beyond the boundaries of their princely state, but it also signifies a reversal of Hegel’s grand claim for India and the “Hindoo” imagination as being trapped or confined to an infantile state of dreaming. For the participants in the Gokul Ashtami, History is arguably no less dreamy than the concept of \textit{maya} or illusion in Vedanta, and its place is “outside” the imaginations of those who are authenticated by the narrator as representatives of the “real India.”

The third and arguably most important example of History’s displacement and the subsequent sovereignty of temporal Indianess takes place well before the festival episode. It is when Godbole makes his first entry to the novel and the narrator describes his unique apparel:

\begin{quote}
He wore a turban that looked like pale purple macaroni, waistcoat, dhoti, socks with clocks. The clocks matched the turban, and this whole appearance suggested harmony – as if he had reconciled the products of East and West, mental as well as physical, and could never be discomposed. (66)
\end{quote}

Godbole’s sense of inter-civilizational harmony connotes a non-dualist aesthetic, one that is echoed in his brief discourse on internationalism with Aziz. However, it is also an echo of the conditional approach to non-dualist, inter-civilizational oneness that both Vivekananda and Coomaraswamy prophesy in their essays on Indian modernity. In Godbole’s case, similar conditions are expressed through the ordering of his clothes. The rhetoric of “clocks” on “socks” suggests an inclusive spirit and an acknowledgement of modern Western time, its connotations of progress and strictly forward movement. The colour-coded match between the clocks and the turban is doubly significant in evoking harmony along the civilizational lines of East and West as well as the temporal lines of tradition and modernity and perhaps the dynamics of stasis and change. The very notion
of these dichotomies is indicative of an Orientalist style, but they are also subverted through Godbole’s physical appearance. This description of Godbole’s appearance recalls the full-bodied image of Purusa in the *Rig Veda*, whose feet are allegorically associated with the *Shudra* caste. Whether we choose to read the feet critically as a symbol of low-caste marginalization or romantically (as Neo-Vedantins do) as the foundation of Indian civilization, the bottom line here is that the *Shudra* is kept and contained to its marginal *varnic* place. Similarly, Godbole’s unique choice of socks betray his own desire (however impersonal) to keep clock-wise, calendrical, modern temporality in its own specific place of containment while remaining centripetally subject to that mode of ritual time that is customarily remembered by the Brahmins and thus symbolically represented as sovereign by the crown-like image of Godbole’s turban.  

Forster’s fictional idea of India is thus characterized as a heterotopia through two allegories: the Circle of impersonal, monistic, *varnic* space; and the Circle of *muhurat*-based, recurrent, ritual time. The significance of this two-dimensional heterotopia lies not in its ideality, but its inaccessibility and its subversive potential to mock and disturb. The latter aspect is emphasized in the definition that Foucault offers for heterotopias in *The Order of Things*. He writes,

> Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy ‘syntax’ in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and opposite one another) to ‘hold together’.

(xviii)

In the Gokul Ashtami episode of *A Passage to India*, the best example of such heterotopic language is in the inscription “God si Love”. As mentioned in section 2.1, the inscription

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It has recently been brought to my attention that “clocks” refer to a particular European fashion of men’s patterned dress socks. However, I argue that even if the “clocks” are not literally present on Godbole’s socks, they are rhetorically significant in the language of their description and it is on the grounds of Forster’s word choices that this interpretation rests.
is partly significant as a “muddle”, a “frustration of reason and form”. Its location is
imagined within a marginal space deep inside the temple, a place where it “could not be
read” and thus as a point of inaccessibility. Yet, unlike most of the other muddles of the
festival, “God si Love” is repeated as a phrase throughout the narrative, an act that
evokes the festival’s recurrent sense of ritual temporality. The phrase also functions
aurally as a soundtrack to the episode. As it combines with the repetition of “Tukaram”
and “Radhakrishna”, the sum effect of these pseudo-Dadaist chants is an aural veil of
heterotopic muddles that almost conceals the festival’s Circle of spatial, temporal, social,
and metaphysical order, but also a veil that looks back and returns an impersonal gaze.

The first such instance of this returned gaze occurs in the frustration performed self-
reflexively by the narrator: “God si Love. Is this the final message of India?”42 The
“message” might be read literally as an example of nonsense, and again, the kind that
Ronny Heaslop might take as an Indophobic sign “of the fundamental slackness that
reveals the race.” It might also be read more subversively according to what postcolonial
theorist Homi Bhabha conceptualizes as “non-sense”. Although there are some problems
and limitations with applying Bhabha’s concept, it is worth pursuing as a means of
further exploring the heterotopic aspects of the festival but also as a means of uncovering
the limits of reading the festival through a rudimentary application of postcolonial theory.

The concept of “non-sense” is discussed in Bhabha’s essay, “Articulating the Archaic:
Cultural Difference and Colonial Nonsense” from The Location of Culture, and it draws
its chief examples from the echo (“ou boum”) in the “Caves” section of A Passage to
India and the owl’s call (“Ya-acabo”) in Joseph Conrad’s Nostramo. Bhabha writes,

42 As previously noted in footnote 26, Adwaita P. Ganguly has discovered an entirely different line in the
first edition: “God is love. Is this the first message of India?” (306). With regards to “si”, Ganguly’s
reading is more sentimental than mine: “The change, or correction, confirms [Forster’s] deep interest in the
possible message. The problem of communication remains, however. Though the message has an universal
appeal, it is difficult for the Hindus to communicate it in any foreign language.” (306) Thus, for Ganguly,
the inscription enunciates not a refusal, but the impossibility, of translation, and largely because the
message is beyond words and therefore sublime. As a result, the “message” is taken as a metaphor for the
sublimity of Indian thought and civilization, a view that firmly places Ganguly’s work in the same
Orientalist, Neo-Vedantic tradition that includes Drew and Das.
What emerges from the dispersal of work is the language of colonial nonsense that displaces those dualities in which the colonial space is traditionally divided: nature/culture, chaos/civility. Ouboum or the owl’s deathcall are not naturalized or primitivistic descriptions of colonial ‘otherness’, they are the inscriptions of an uncertain colonial silence that mocks the social performance of language with their non-sense; that baffles the communicable verities of culture with their refusal to translate. (124)

For Bhabha, the power of colonial non-sense as such lies chiefly in its challenge to the signifying process. Thus, in the case of Forster, the echo of “ou boum” in the Marabar caves functions as a signifier lacking a clear signified; or if there is to be a signified, it exists in the non-sensual form of absolute silence. Either way, it is through endless repetition of “ou boum” that the signification process continues to be disrupted and that “the representation of empire’s work” is dispersed (124). This also generates a disruption of the binaries that define colonial systems of knowledge (“nature/culture” and “chaos/civility”) as well as those that characterize Orientalist thought (East/West, tradition/modernity, stasis/change, etc.). As an act of “non-sense”, the echo cannot be placed. Its semiotic in-betweenness thus comes to mock the empire and its systems of linguistic and epistemological order.

Many of these traits are certainly applicable to the nonsense of “God si Love”, but there are limits to the radical potential of that application as well as well. The case of “God si Love” might appear as a more ideal example of subversive non-sense because it provokes a shift in perception. It can be read as a failure of English translation, but it is through its repetition within the Gokul Ashtami episode that the utterance signifies a refusal to translate itself – or rather, a refusal to unveil itself – and thus it mocks the knowing gaze of its potential viewing subject. However, there is one key difference between the nonsense of “ou-boum” and that of “God si Love” and it centers around the issue of subjectivity. As Bhabha emphasizes in his essay, the anti-signifying aspects of non-sense also entail that such utterances are “inscribed without a transcendent subject that knows” (126). Yet, in the “Temple” section of Passage, there is a knowing subject, and perhaps more than one, inscribed behind the veil of “God si Love”. The most obvious subject is
the Brahminical one represented by Godbole in his knowledge and pursuit of dharma, muhrat, and brahman. The subtler figure is arguably evoked in the allegory of the entire festival as a single impersonal subject of civilizational Indianness. This collective form of subjectivity may not be presented to us an anthropomorphic figure that knows, but it is a heterotopia that operates according to its own knowable rules of temporal, spatial and social order. It is also one that writes back in ways that serve to mock and baffle, but also provoke. The writing here is enunciated through the translation of “God si Love”, but at this point it is clear that its political significance is not as an act of colonial non-sense, but rather as a symbolic gesture of Indian counter-modernity. There are two aspects to the gesture encoded within the “final message” of “God si Love”. It writes back to the subject that encounters its mocking gaze and it offers two choices: to remain estranged by this veil of Indian counter-modernity or to “come come come” to the other side of the veil and enter the Circle of Indianness as a ritual participant. Either way, one constant remains: this representation of heterotopic Indianness refuses to unveil itself completely to the non-participant and it also refuses to be displaced by the march of History. Instead, the symbolic first and “final message” of “God si Love” will repeat itself ad infinitum, just as the festival and its twin Circles of varnic, ritual order do every year, reaffirming the sovereignty of Indianness.

Given the title of Bhabha’s essay, it is worth noting that “God si Love” is not exactly a sign of “archaic” culture; this too distinguishes it from the colonial non-sense of “ou boun”. Unlike the latter, “God si Love” is a product of human authorship. It is true that we will never know the identity of the author of “God si Love”, let alone of the poet or

43 Of course, one might argue that the Gokul Ashtami itself is an expression of the archaic because “Hinduism” is the oldest of South Asian religions; this is the view Benita Parry takes in her reading of the festival as “an expression of an aboriginal philosophy over whose tenets the Aryan invaders of India had triumphed, assimilated aspects but rejecting the whole in their creation of Brahminical Hinduism” (1998 234). This view is consistent with the non-fictional speculations Forster offers in his explanation of the festival’s cultural origins in The Hill of Devi: “It was very primitive – much older than Hinduism, I am sure; really the worship of the spirit of vegetation” (113). However, as demonstrated previously in other sections of this chapter, there is no reason to assume consistency between Forster’s fictional vision and autobiographical experience, especially when his fictional vision already betrays strong signs of the festival’s Sanskritization of pre-colonial cultural forms rather than their preservation in an original or “archaic” form.
the poem from which the inscription is said to have been translated. We will also never
know if the translator was of Indian or British descent, but what remains significant is
that the language in which “God si Love” is literally translated is English. Thus, unlike
the non-sense of “ou boum”, “God si Love” is inscribed with the materiality of a modern
language and this positions it temporally as a metonym for modernity rather than of pre-
historic or archaic culture. This sense of poetic contiguity is consistent with the narrative
of modernity’s displacement to a place outside the festival’s twin Circles because “God si
Love” functions symbolically as a veil. Its location is found deep inside the most
marginal of spaces in the temple, yet it functions as a heterotopic inscription that writes
back a gesture of both frustration and refusal to all outsiders. The significance of this
irony also extends to the issues of time, as the veil of “God si Love” marks the festival as
an expression of counter-modernity, an endless repetition that is oriented to disrupt the
present rather than to indicate a romantic turn to a traditional notion of the distant or
originary past.

One of the main reasons for bringing Bhabha into this discussion is to demonstrate the
limits of reading literary Indianness exclusively from the limits of postcolonial theory –
that is, of a reading strategy that in its most conventional forms places its primary focus
on the representation of modern Western imperialism. This focus is not at all the
weakness of Bhabha’s brilliant essay, but it is a problem for any reader interested in
engaging a work of “early modernist ‘colonial’ literature” from a place of critical double-
consciousness in regards to issues of colonial modernity and Neo-Vedantic Indianness as
different, but equally problematic, systems of power (Bhabha 123). In the case of Forster,
this is a strategy that also aims to scrutinize the politics of the “Temple” and not leave it
ignored in the shadows of the “Caves”. As someone who otherwise identifies a
“postcolonialist”, this critique is intended as a theoretical challenge, not as a rejection of
postcolonial scholarship.

Finally, by testing Bhabha’s theory of colonial non-sense on “God si Love”, we can also
consider a different approach to the rhetoric of in-betweenness that is otherwise
characteristic of Bhabha’s larger work. Again, in Bhabha’s reading of the “Caves”, “ou
boum” signifies a critical displacement of the various dualities that characterize colonial
forms of knowledge as well as social, political, and territorial power. By contrast, in this reading of Forster’s “Temple”, “God si Love” is the primary site of in-betweenness, but it serves to rewrite its own set of dualities: that is, of the inside and the outside; absolute participation and frustrated observation; repetition and progress; Circular ritual time and linear Historical time; and ultimately, of civilizational Indianness and modernity. These dualities are kept in tact by the in-betweenness of “God si Love”. The latter functions symbolically as a veil that shrouds the inner Circles of impersonal, varnic order and simultaneously projects a heterotopic face of muddled nonsense, sovereignty, and counter-modernity. More simply, it is a veil that hides as well as mocks.

This section has focused on Forster’s representation of History as a trope of modernity as well as an object of mockery, and thus the representation of the Gokul Ashtami as a symbol of heterotopic Indianness that not only refuses to be displaced, but also that which keeps History in its place outside the festival’s allegorical Circle of ritual time. The next section of this chapter continues the discussion of outsider spaces and subjectivities by looking at human agents of History in the novel. The focus is primarily on Aziz and his turn to anti-colonial nationalism – an aspect of his characterization that Forster’s scholars have generally ignored, but one that is nevertheless central to the articulation of Indianness in the novel.

2.7 The In-betweenness of Aziz

When Forster’s narrator opens the Gokul Ashtami episode, he initially defines the setting of the Mau temple as being exclusive to “Hindus, Hindus only” (270). This rhetoric of exclusivity is also complemented by a sense of cultural inaccessibility and especially so

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44 Parry notes this issue of religious identity as a key aspect of the novel’s narratological structure, where each section is named according to a form of religious space: “Mosque” (Islam); “Caves” (Jainism); and “Temple” (Hinduism). Parry writes, “The novel offers this triad as the form of paradoxical differences contained within the unbroken whole: incorporated in the enclosing frame is the gracious culture of Islam in India, a society where personal relations amongst Moslems do flourish; the un-peopled Jain caves, place of the ascetic renunciation of the world; and the buoyant religious community of the Hindus, internally divided and internally cohesive” (1998 230).
for the colonial British subject: “The assembly was in a tender, happy state unknown to an English crowd” (284). The inaccessibility of this space is partly attributed to the literal setting of the festival episode in Mau, a fictional princely state. Historically, most Indian princely states retained some level of political autonomy from the laws of colonial jurisprudence, and this was no less the case for Dewas, the princely state setting of Forster’s second trip to India. In the fictional case of Mau, its independence from the British Raj is also signified spatially as a realm of religious and cultural experience that exists outside the borders of colonial imagination. These borders are imposed by the impersonal, collective “assembly” of “Hindus” at the festival, rather than by British colonial rule, and they are also unique to the world of Mau. The latter quality is illustrated through a contrast with the cultural transparencies of other princely states described in the novel. As Fielding tells Aziz, “‘We had a very different reception at Mudkul and Deora, they were kindness itself at Deora, the Maharajah and Maharani wanted us to see everything’” (287). By contrast, Fielding and his family of liberal colonials end up seeing nothing of Mau’s cultural life and more importantly, its “spiritual side” (304). This is partly because Godbole is too absorbed in the festival to play host and guide. By invoking the rhetoric of dharma, Godbole gives his excuse indirectly to Aziz in writing: “‘my religious duties prevent me from taking action’” (280). As a result, Fielding and his family are alienated from the festival and the Hindu world of Mau consequently appears to them as “‘a place of the dead’” (286).

However, as with muddles like “God si Love”, Fielding and his family’s perception of Mau is the heterotopic effect of a veil that hides the ritual life of the festival from their knowing gaze. Their experience as outsiders affirms Richard Allen’s reading of the novel as a whole: “If there is any authenticity in the novel it lies not in the depiction of India but in the depiction of the Western observing consciousness” (100). Thus, for critics like Allen, A Passage to India is not a novel about Indianness, but rather the crises of the modern Western self and how the subject of that self comes into being through confrontation with the limits of his or her own ability to see and know the non-Western Other. For Sara Suleri, Forster’s treatment of this crisis signifies a “recolonizing” of India because the idea of “India” remains restricted to a place of marginality within the “liberal imagination” of Forster as well as early scholars like Lionel Trilling (108). These are
valid arguments, but they generally focus on the subjectivity of characters like Fielding as colonial outsiders standing in opposition to the novel’s Hindu insiders. However, in my reading, Fielding’s outsider subjectivity is mostly constituted by his lack of ritual identity and I distinguish the latter from an exclusively religious or ethnic Hindu identity. Fielding and his family are initially alienated from the festival because they want to attend and view it as both tourists and detached observers, not as ritual participants. As a result, they are positioned as outsiders.

Later in the episode, there is a point when Fielding and his family do go out and attempt to see the festival by observing the final procession from within a boat. Yet, when their boat collides and capsizes with another carrying Aziz and Mrs. Moore’s son Ralph, “the four outsiders” are translated into ritual participants of the Circle (299). They fall into the river precisely at the same moment that the ritual objects from the temple are immersed. The symbolic associations between “the four outsiders” and the God (as represented by the ritual objects) is also developed accidentally by the sudden experience of physical intimacy and thus a comic expression of brahman-ical oneness: “[Stella] shrank into her husband’s arms, then reached forward, then flung herself against Aziz” (300). The river becomes a metaphor for the veil of Indianness, and falling into it is akin to lifting the veil in order to cross over to its inner side. Regardless of their British ethnicity or their political status as colonials, Fielding and his family do become involuntary ritual participants, yet they retain their identity as non-Hindus. Also, as with all participants, their translational entry into the oneness of the Circle is paradoxically fulfilled through a momentary loss of their agency for empirical modes of seeing and knowing. One cannot observe the festival while participating in it, just as one cannot keep one foot on either side of the veil. According to the ritual laws of the Circle, such assertions of in-betweenness are technically inadmissible.  

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45 This strict distinction between ritual participant and outsider-observer represents another fictional deviation from Forster’s personal accounts of the Gokul Ashtami in The Hill of Devi. As part of his employment, Forster was required to not only attend the festival, but to also dress up in a turban and a dhoti, not to mention participate in tasks such as selecting clothes for the idol. Yet, throughout all of his accounts, he remains a detached observer, staunchly insisting “though I am dressed as a Hindu I shall never
It is worth reiterating that, as a member of Fielding’s party, Aziz is also referred to as one of the “outsiders”, further challenging a narrow view of outsider subjectivity along colonial or ethno-religious British lines. In fact, there is actually a stronger emphasis on Aziz’s struggle with the festival and its veil of Indianness. This is not because he is simply a Muslim and therefore an alien to the festival’s community of “Hindus, Hindus only.” Rather, his struggle has mostly to do with his political approach to Indianness. Furthermore, as the novel’s primary representative of postcolonial Indian modernity, Aziz also stands before us as an agent of History’s forward movement. As a result, his relationship to the Gokul Ashtami plays with the Hegelian rhetoric of History as a form of theatre, where symbols of pre-colonial India, colonial and postcolonial modernity as well as the counter-modernity of the festival stand dialogically in counterpoint with one another as actors on a single stage.

Prior to the Gokul Ashtami episode, the primary representation of Aziz in A Passage to India is grounded on his identity as a Muslim and a romantic of the Mughal past. Both of these aspects contribute to his distinctive ideal of Islamic Indianness. While reciting an Urdu poem by Ghalib, Aziz is aroused to affectively meditate on this ideal: “a calm assurance came the feeling that India was one; Moslem; always had been” (96). However, as mentioned earlier in section 2.1, Aziz also exhibits feelings of communal distrust against Hindus, the nature of which is shared by others in the Muslim community of Chandrapore (“All illness proceeds from Hindus,” Mr Haq said”) as well as Hindus like the magistrate Mr. Das (96). This mutual feeling is highlighted in the silent dialogue that takes place between Aziz and Das when the latter seeks the former’s solidarity in the cause of anti-colonial nationalism:

They shook hands in a half-embrace that typified the entente. Between people of distant climes there is always the possibility of romance, but the various branches become one” (107). The Gokul Ashtami episode of A Passage to India is devoid of characters with a similar position of being physically inside, yet emotionally or intellectually outside, the festival.
of Indians know too much about each other to surmount the unknowable easily. The approach is prosaic. ‘Excellent,’ said Aziz, patting a stout shoulder and thinking, ‘I wish they did not remind me of cow-dung’; Das thought, ‘Some Moslems are very violent.’ They smiled wistfully, each spying the thought in the other’s heart, and Das, the more articulate, said: ‘Excuse my mistakes, realize my limitations. Life is not easy as we know it on the earth.’ (252)

These signs of communal tension give the novel a prophetic sensibility and especially so for readers aware of India’s violent partition with Pakistan in 1947. However, the later sections of the novel offer a different portrayal of Aziz; he attempts to reinvent his subjectivity as a secular Indian nationalist, and particularly so through the double-events of his trial and his relocation to Mau. While the latter events may render his entry into politics as inauthentic, the narrative of his political metamorphosis remains significant for depicting how he attempts to re-imagine himself and his sense of community in modern, secular, and nationalist terms.

In a non-festival moment of the “Temple” section, Aziz declares to himself, “‘I am an Indian at last’” (279). The significance of this utterance lies mostly in its timing. It happens before the actual event of Indian independence, let alone independently of the various anti-colonial movements led by Gandhi, Nehru, Tilak, Jinnah, or any of the other popular figures that were active at the time of the novel’s writing. Yet, by the nature of its timing, Aziz’s declaration of his imagined Indian identity is partly consistent with Partha Chatterjee’s theory of anti-colonial nationalism. Chatterjee writes, “Anticolonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its political battle with imperial power” (my italics 6). For Chatterjee, the factors of time and antecedence are key to distinguishing the ways in which nations were historically imagined as communities in Asia and Africa as opposed to Western Europe, the Americas, and the former Soviet Union; this distinction is also theorized partly as a postcolonial critique of Benedict Anderson’s thesis on modern nations as forms of Imagined Communities. However, as illustrated below, the fictional case of Aziz is one that echoes the historical trends in Chatterjee’s work and stands to parody those patterns of anti-colonial nationalism as well.
Aziz’s declaration of his Indian identity and therefore of an imagined Indian nation takes place well before its historical possibility, but it is also staged in the fictional setting of Mau, rather than “within colonial society”. The significance of the latter is important because it is a space that is technically beyond the reach of colonial jurisprudence, but also because it establishes a contrapuntal relationship between the event of Aziz’s declaration and the equally grand event of the Rajah’s death. As mentioned previously in section 2.6, the knowledge of the Rajah’s death is displaced from the consciousness of the participants inside the festival and this casts both the Rajah and Aziz as contesting actors in Forster’s symbolic theatre of History. Like Aziz, the Rajah anticipates social and political change; he intuits these possibilities in his exchange with the visiting colonial officer, Colonel Maggs. Upon his arrival, Maggs advises the Rajah against employing Aziz in his court: “[he] rallied the old Rajah for permitting a Moslem doctor to approach his sacred person” (279). The incident is one of the few, if not only, instances where Forster acknowledges the colonial policy of divide-and-rule as a factor on Hindu-Muslim communal tensions, not to mention in ways that reinforce caste divisions (as signified by Maggs’ anxiety around “approaching” and polluting the Rajah’s “sacred” and therefore pure body). In response, “[t]he Rajah did not take the hint, but replied that Hindus were less exclusive than formerly, thanks to the enlightened commands of the Viceroy, and he felt it was his duty to move with the times” (279-80). That is, to move forward with the march of History. The exchange reveals the Rajah’s double-consciousness surrounding the affairs of the court and customs of the temple, but also of modernity and Indianness. His acknowledgement of modern secularism, and the colonial figure of the “Viceroy” as its vehicle of “enlightened” – or rather, Enlightenment-style – thinking, demonstrates a willingness to pursue social and political change and in ways that mark a potential epochal break with tradition and a previous stage of History. However, the rhetoric of “duty” doubly inscribes this break with religious significance, thus casting modern progress as the fulfillment of a larger political dharma, and this gesture partly carries the effect of recasting the Forster’s theatre of History as a series of ritual events. Thus, if the ritual of this break opens with the narrative of the Rajah’s response to Maggs, it arguably finds its grand moment in the muhurat of his death. However, the theatre of History does not end here; it continues in the contest between the
birth of Aziz’s Indian identity (and Indian nationalism as a whole) and the repeated birth of Indianness as represented by the Gokul Ashtami. Although there is very little interaction between Aziz and the festival participants, the nature of this contest takes place largely over the definition of the “spiritual”, a term that resonates strongly with Chatterjee’s work on Indian anti-colonial nationalism.

As discussed in section 1.4, for Chatterjee, there is an aspect of anti-colonial Indian nationalism that involves the imagining of “social institutions and practices” along the bifurcated lines of the Material and the Spiritual, the public and the private, and the outside and the inside. The contrapuntal relationship between Aziz and the Rajah, the birth of the nation and the death of both the princely state and its monarchical tradition is grounded on parallel engagements with a concept of the Material: that is, “the domain of the “outside”, of the economy and of statecraft, of science and technology, a domain where the West had proved its superiority” (6). The counterpoint between Aziz and the festival, is conversely oriented to the “inner domain” of the Spiritual, where “the essential marks of cultural identity” (i.e., Indianness) are idealized as objects of cultural distinction and therefore preservation. In both cases, Aziz’s relationship to the Rajah is contrapuntal because he arguably perceives each domain differently. Where his nationalism is motivated by a personal hatred of the British, the Rajah’s acceptance of secular and political modernity is traced as an act of impersonal duty. The counterpoint over the Spiritual is more complicated because it reveals Aziz’s hindrances in his relationship to the festival as well as the other nationalists in the novel. I will deal with both hindrances by beginning with Aziz’s parodic relationship to the latter.

As Chatterjee writes, “nationalism declares the domain of the spiritual its sovereign territory and refuses to allow the colonial power to intervene in that domain” (6). One of the first historical examples of the Spiritual domain as such is in the Bengali nationalists’ engagement with their vernacular language and literary traditions: “The [Bengali] bilingual intelligentsia came to think of its own language as belonging to that inner domain of cultural identity, from which the nation first had to declare its sovereignty and then had to transform in order to make it adequate for the modern world” (7). The fictional analogue to this practice of Spiritual sovereignty is found in the “new monthly
magazine” being edited by Das’ brother-in-law, Mr. Bhattacharya and the particular interests its editors have in publishing Aziz’s poetry (251). It is by mere coincidence that Bhattacharya is a Bengali and thus a possible metaphorical substitute for the same intelligentsia that Chatterjee focuses on his work. It is also worth noting how this project for the magazine concurs with Benedict Anderson’s theories on the role played by print-culture capitalism in imagining readers into communities of citizens within a future nation-state. At this point, the line between Material and Spiritual space is clearly delineated. The domain of the Material is in the literary form of the magazine, the various modern technologies used to publish it, and the capitalist economy through which it gains circulation. The domain of the Spiritual lies inside the magazine: poems written for a general audience – “not for Hindus, but Indians generally” (251). If the lines between material and spiritual are clear, that is because the magazine’s editor has imagined them as so. Where they become messy is in the way Aziz muddles the vision.

The first problem is that Aziz fails to submit anything for the magazine. The narrator explains,

The poem for Mr Bhattacharya never got written, but it had an effect. It led him towards the vague and bulky figure of a mother-land. He was without natural affection for the land of his birth, but the Marabar Hills drove him to it. Half closing his eyes, he attempted to love India. She must imitate Japan. Not until she is a nation will her sons be treated with respect. (253)

Aziz’s affiliation with Das and Bhattacharya ends as he leaves Chandrapore for Mau, but he continues to write and is inspired to produce a body of work concerned with themes of anti-colonialism and postcolonial modernity. One such poem deals with the present and future role of women in modern India. For the narrator, these poems do not make any sense; their content is muddled, thus reiterating the novel’s primary trope of Indianness. Nevertheless, it is evident that the poems still contain a nationalist vision, even if it is one that represents an inversion of the forms espoused by the Nationalist Committee. The narrator explains,
His poems were all on one topic – oriental womanhood. ‘The purdah must go,’ was their burden, ‘otherwise we shall never be free.’ And he declared (fantastically) that India would not have been conquered if women as well as men had fought at Plassey. ‘But we do not show our women to the foreigner’ – not explaining how this was to be managed, for he was writing a poem. (279)

Aziz’s poems are muddled because they envision a two-pronged approach to the outside, Material domain, one that can be deconstructed by reading its narrative in reverse. The poems imagine the Indian woman as an iconic figure of cultural uniqueness; she is consequently positioned within a space behind her veil, and therefore beyond the knowing gaze of the colonial or Western outsider. With the purdah as a marker of inside/outside space, the poems thus make a fairly obvious assertion of national sovereignty, and one that would seem to be consistent with Chatterjee’s theory of nationalist imagination. However, the poems also make strong assertions about India’s postcolonial future and go on to imagine the grand unveiling of the Indian woman, an event that signifies a break with tradition and one that echoes the death of both the Rajah and the monarchical tradition of the princely states. For Aziz, the promise of the modern national sovereignty is contingent on the Indian woman’s social transformation, her unveiled entry into the Material domain of anti-colonial struggle and political modernity. *We shall be free but only once the purdah is gone.* The removal of purdah is not just symbolic; it is the crucial event that sets up the stage for the larger processes of anti-colonial resistance and postcolonial nation-building.

The poems thus express a desire to simultaneously construct, contain, and liberate the Indian woman. They also present a few obvious problems in terms of gender (i.e., the appropriation of women’s voices and bodies at the rhetorical service of masculine nationalism) and Fielding highlights the potential hypocrisy behind such rhetoric when he mocks Aziz: “‘Free our women and India will be free. Try it, my lad. Free your own lady in the first place…’” (305). However, within the larger vision of the novel and its theatre of History, Aziz’s poems are also muddled because they ultimately lose sight of the Spiritual domain when imagining the unveiling of the Indian woman within the Material space of anti-colonial, nationalist struggle. This consequently disables the possibility of
nationalist becoming. After all, for this type of nationalism, how is one to imagine postcolonial sovereignty when there is no longer an inside space, a space of the Spiritual domain, a space of cultural uniqueness within the national imagination? Thus, where the Rajah demonstrates some prophetic insights on the inevitability of historical progress, Aziz presents a vision that is theoretically flawed and therefore makes a farce out of India’s modern destiny; he declares his postcolonial identity before independence, but then muddles the movement before it has even been launched.

The other, and perhaps more crucial, note of counterpoint is sounded through the shared motif of the veil in both the *purdah* poems and the temple setting of the Gokul Ashtami. As with the tension between the Rajah and Aziz, the counterpoint between the poems and the temple is characterized by patterns of divergence and convergence. Firstly, the object of the veil is not the same for the two events and much of this has to do with religion: Muslim women for Aziz’s poems, Hindu gods for the Gokul Ashtami. Yet, within their respective religious contexts, these objects share the same significance: both are constructed and held as unique and therefore pure. That said, the concepts of the pure is understood differently within the worldview of each event: for the nationalist, the Muslim woman is held as a Spiritual figure of cultural uniqueness, a means to national sovereignty; for the temple, the Hindu god is held as a point of absolute purity and largely so for the evocation of the Circle of varnic order. At a symbolic level, there is convergence: the body of the Muslim woman and the Circle of the festival are symbols for different visions of Indianess. However, there is also a divergence in how each is characterized by its symbolic acts of veiling. Aziz calls for an end to the institution of *purdah* and through it an unveiling of the modern Indian nation; he also envisions a re-veiling of the Indian woman in order to displace and estrange the colonial or Western subject as an outsider. As we have already seen in this chapter, the dynamics of revelation and re-veil-ation are no less characteristic of the Gokul Ashtami. However, one effect of these dynamics is that it heterotopically displaces and estranges all non-participating subjects as outsiders, and this includes liberal Westerners like Fielding, Adela Quested, and Mrs. Moore as well as secular, anti-colonial nationalists like Aziz, Das and Bhattacharya. The veil of “God si Love” does not discriminate British colonial modernity from its postcolonial Indian counterpart, nor does it differentiate a nationalist
of Muslim origins from a Hindu one. All are agents of History, and therefore objects of the festival’s returned gaze as well as addressees of India’s “final message”. The “message” is that there are some things in India that will remain unveiled, and these things are essential to its civilization, regardless of who is in the occupying seat of power – the Mughals, the Marathas, the British, the secular nationalists, and arguably even today’s fascist Hindutva ethno-religious nationalists. For the collective subjectivity of the Gokul Ashtami festival, all such agents of History must be restricted to their own marginal place within the sovereign circle of temporal Indianness, and it is on this declarative note that the novel’s theater of History finds its denouement.

Nevertheless, the humbling of Aziz’s flawed nationalism finds a coda through the Hindu community’s recognition of his Muslim identity. The narrator explains, “Although [Aziz] was an outsider, and excluded from their rites, they were always particularly charming to him at this time; he and his household received small courtesies and presents, just because he was outside” (290). That is, positioned outside the temple space, but centripetally translated into the peripheral rings of the festival’s symbolic Circle, marginalized and included in ways not unlike the Sweepers and the prisoner. This varnic translation of Aziz’s Muslim identity does not signify a breach of the veil. Rather, it figuratively represents an ontological split within Aziz’s subjectivity: his political consciousness represents the location of one self in the outside world of History; and his involuntary ritual participation signifies the location of another self that is unknowingly included in the Circle. Although this conditional sense of ritual inclusion is echoed in the incident where “the four outsiders” descend into the river, the difference is that Aziz is received as a guest to the festival whereas Fielding and his family receive no such gestures of hospitality. In my reading, this has less to do with Aziz’s ethno-racial identity as a brown-skinned Indian than with his being a permanent resident of Mau.

Conversely, while Aziz’s disinterest in the festival restricts the possibility of his becoming “Indian” according to these terms, it is worth considering some reasons that go beyond the “Hindu-ness” of the Gokul Ashtami. This distinction has as much, if not more, to do with Aziz’s discomfort with vernacular and therefore “lower” forms of religion, ritual, and myth. This is illustrated in his adverse reaction to the Muslim Shrines
of the Body and the Head, and the mutual sense of reverence (and perhaps even bhakti) shown by a “few” Muslims and Hindus of Mau (282). The narrator tells us, “When Aziz arrived, and found that even Islam was idolatrous, he grew scornful” (282). He eventually grows tolerant, but his transformation of the Shrine into his own personal garden demonstrates a continued disregard for the Shrine’s possible history of ritual use, let alone of customs for translating its saguna idolatry into nirguna consciousness. This is also evident in his dominant appreciation of Islam through its elite and therefore “higher” forms of Persian poetry and imperial Mughal history, rather than with the Shrines or popular Islamic festivals like Mohurram; incidents of the latter do take place in Chandrapore, but there is no evidence that Aziz or his fellow educated Muslim elites have a history, let alone an interest, in participating in its rituals. There is also a trace of Mohurram as a recurring festival, and this is suggested in the image of the remains in the river that closes the Gokul Ashtami episode: “little images of Ganapati, baskets of ten-day corn, tiny tazias after Mohurram – scapegoats, husks, emblems of passage” (299). These remains further characterize Mau as a symbol of Indianness defined by ritual activity, rather than strictly “Hindu” religiosity.

If Aziz’s Muslim identity marks the point of his translational entry to the other side of the veil of Indianness, the potentiality of his friendship with Godbole grants Aziz a chance of becoming further authenticated as an “Indian” and in ways run counter to his friendship with Fielding. As many critics have observed, the novel ends on a tragicomic note with the failure of Aziz and Fielding’s friendship, yet with some intuition of its future possibility. For Aziz, a personal relationship with Fielding can only be possible once “every blasted Englishman has been driven into the sea” (306). In other words, such a friendship is contingent on the end of colonial rule and therefore an act of History.

Meanwhile, in the real-time present moment of the novel’s closing lines, the theatre of History has arrived “not yet” and “not there” in late colonial India (306). However, on the margins of the same dramatic stage, another offer of friendship is made from Godbole to Aziz: “Never be angry with me. I am, as far as my limitations permit, your true friend” (290). In contrast to Fielding, Godbole’s offer is impersonal, and it substitutes the connotations of homoerotic desire with a tone of religiosity that can be read from both Hindu and Islamic perspectives. For Aziz, the “Friend” is a “Persian expression for God”
This connotation resonates with Aziz as he responds to Godbole’s words affectively with a child-like humility: “Aziz felt like a baby in that strange presence, a baby who unexpectedly receives a toy. He smiled…” (290). However, as we have seen throughout this chapter, Godbole’s theology is oriented to nirguna brahman, an impersonal notion of “God”. Thus, from his perspective, the offer of friendship carries an impersonal quality. It is not an intimate relationship of two equal individuals, but a pedagogical one where the rhetoric of “friend” serves as a metaphor for “God” and the latter a Neo-Vedantic metaphor for guru, thus translating Aziz with the subjectivity of a potential shishya or disciple. To some extent, Aziz has already been initiated as so through the guidance he receives from Godbole throughout the course of his transition to Mau: i.e., Godbole’s advice on the varnic “cleavage” that exists “between Brahman and non-Brahman” castes (278). What the novel leaves open is the degree to which Aziz is willing to nurture this friendship and its translation of Hindu-Muslim co-existence in the form of discipleship.

One might be compelled to read Godbole’s offer of friendship as a form of Hindu conversion. However, aside from the conventional argument that pre-colonial Hinduism lacks a concept of religious conversion, it is worth noting that Godbole never identifies himself as a “Hindu” and certainly not to the extent that Aziz does as a Muslim throughout the novel. Godbole also has no connection to the novel’s Hindu intelligentsia – i.e., Das, Bhattacharya as well as the Hindu members of Chandrapore’s moderately anti-colonial “Committee of Notables” (97). In fact, Forster’s fictional vision of the Gokul Ashtami would read very differently had he included characters like Das and Bhattacharya as ritual participants, let alone as Brahminical or other such high-caste, dwija authorities. Forster could have easily based Godbole or any of these characters on B. G. Tilak, the Maharashtrian anti-colonial nationalist who revived the Ganesh Chaturthi festival as a means of politically mobilizing Hindu masses through public religious ceremonies. Both of these festivals could be read as symbolic assertions of religio-cultural sovereignty, but the difference is that the Gokul Ashtami is imagined by Forster as a phenomenon where the festival’s participants – the collective of the varnic Circle – have the agency to displace the Material realm of History to an “outside” space, thus reversing Chatterjee’s theory of anti-colonial nationalism. The assertions of the Gokul
Ashtami also rewrite the Hegelian narrative of India by pointing to the political realms of History, nationalism, and anything else that passes “outside” Mau as elements of a “dream” (270).

Finally, it is tempting to read the counter-modern Indianness of the Gokul Ashtami as forms of traditionalism, especially given the evocations of Vedic ritual culture, pre-colonial bhakti, and Neo-Vedanta. As discussed in section 2.6, this view is challenged by the English-language translation of “God si Love” as both a symbolic veil of Indianness and a metonym for the age of colonial modernity. There is also a nod to a unique form of postmodernism (or at least post-nationalism) that comes through Godbole. While it is clear that he is not an anti-colonial nationalist, it is also evident that he is not completely apolitical. He reveals a trace of his political philosophy through his favourable response to Aziz’s poem on “internationality”. As he tells Aziz, “Ah, India, who seems not to move, will go there while other nations waste their time” (279). Thus, for Godbole, the “stage” of modern nationalism is a waste of History. A similar critique is made in the conclusion of the novel: “India a nation! What an apotheosis! Last comer to the drab nineteenth-century sisterhood! Waddling in at this hour of the world to take her seat! She whose only peer was the Holy Roman Empire, she shall rank with Guatemala and Belgium perhaps” (306). Thus, for Forster, the idea of modern India as a nation-state is a mark of decline from its ancient civilizational glory, and its lateness to the “sisterhood” of nations reintroduces the trope of muddled Indianness. The “sisterhood” as such is irrelevant to the twentieth-century and the political pursuits of nationalists like Aziz and Das are thus rendered quixotic. Yet, the trope of muddled Indianness is readily diminished through Godbole’s vision of “internationality” as a brahman-ical oneness of nations, one that is fulfilled through the means of bhakti – that is, the path of devotion in an impersonal and inevitably varnic mode. If this is to be taken as a form of what Vinay Lal calls “political Hinduism”, it is more accurate to view it as a form of Hindu internationalism rather than the territorial-bound Hindutva nationalism of either Savarkar or Golwalkar. Yet, by placing a rhetorical emphasis on “India”, Godbole highlights that his vision belongs to an Indutva tradition and one that is equally as modern as Hindutva, though marked by a different style and tropology, not to mention a different set of “problems” both theoretical and socio-political.
Conclusion

Forster depicts the Gokul Ashtami as a symbol of Indianness – of the subcontinent’s civilizational essence – but he also goes beyond imagining it merely as a utopian site of sublime or mystical oneness. The Gokul Ashtami is a Circle of varnic order and as argued above, this system of translated caste relations is actually what enables the experience of oneness in this episode. Oneness as such is not an aspect of everyday Indian life in Mau, let alone colonial Chandrapore. It is a ritualized experience generated through a Circle of varnic order, yet contained within a second Circle of muhurat temporality, and it is the Brahminical subject who ensures both the fulfillment as well as the limits of both allegorical Circles as dharmic acts of his ritual authority.

While this reading of the festival’s varnic order shows strong continuities between Forster and the Neo-Vedantic intellectuals of modern Indian history, it is worth noting a few differences. For one, Forster’s approach to varnic order is clearly hierarchical and highly ritualistic, whereas Neo-Vedantins like Gandhi, Golwalkar, Radhakrishnan, and Vivekananda have a strong tendency to reclaim varnashramadharma as a system of caste equality. Secondly, Forster imagines the Gokul Ashtami prophetically as a counter-modern phenomenon, articulating its sovereignty above the hegemonies of both British colonial rule and postcolonial Indian modernity (in potentia). As discussed in the previous chapter, the Neo-Vedantins hold varnashramadharma as the bedrock of postcolonial Indian modernity. Thus, where the latter envision varnic Indianness as tool for historical progress, Forster represents it heterotopically as a technology of dissonance and repetition and in ways that doubly challenge the use of postcolonial strategies for reading the festival as a site of anti-colonial or subaltern resistance.

Regardless of these differences, it is clear that A Passage to India belongs within the “tradition” of Indutva narratives. If the history of imagining Indianness has its roots in eighteenth-century British Orientalism, the politics of Forster’s position as an artist and intellectual of the late colonial period demand some re-evaluation. Forster tended to view himself as a liberal humanist, as defined in A Passage to India through Fielding’s worldview: “The world… is a globe of men who are trying to reach one another and can
best do so by the help of good will plus culture and intelligence” (my italics 57). There is also no doubt that the novel is critical of British rule and colonial rule, particularly in the episode of Aziz’s wrongful arrest. Yet, while Forster’s portrait of Indian life is diverse enough to weave together Hindu, Muslim, Marathi, Bengali, Brahmin, and Dalit characters, it nevertheless asserts an essentialist view through the Gokul Ashtami festival as a site of Indianness. As a novelist, Forster thus occupies the unique position of being a liberal humanist, an internal colonial critic, and an Orientalist. However, as a concept, the latter needs to be qualified further. Forster’s Orientalism serves neither the purpose of affirming and enforcing Britain’s will to rule India (as in the case of William Jones) nor of imagining India in essentialist, civilizational terms for the sake of anti-colonial nationalism or religio-cultural revivalism (as in the case of Neo-Vedantic discourse). Rather, Forster’s Orientalism operates primarily as a “style of thought” rather than one of domination. It is a style of rhetorically imagining India through a set of essences, as troped in the symbols of varna, brahman-ical oneness, impersonal modes of being, etc. It is also a style deployed to envision Indianness as a limit to obverse civilizational forms: i.e., the modernities of colonialism as well as anti-colonial nationalism. Beyond that, the purpose of using this style is ambivalent at best. It is neither Indophobic nor celebratory (as we will see in the case of Rao’s The Serpent and the Rope). Similarly, while the central character of Forster’s Indutva narrative is a Brahmin, the latter is privileged but not to the extent that Brahmin/Non-Brahmin power relations are fully mystified. Forster’s narrative thus allows for a critical engagement with caste, but the history of Forster scholarship has never fully exploited this opportunity to the extent that has been done in this chapter.

In The Twice-born Fiction, Meenakshi Mukherjee argues that “Since A Passage to India, no novelist writing in English, Indian or British, dealing with an Indian background, has been able to evade the shadow of Forster…”, thus raising the issue of literary inheritance and mimicry (27). I agree that it is hard to see how ethnically Indian Anglophone writers like Raja Rao and Arundhati Roy could escape the literary influence of Forster given his canonical place in modern English literature. However, the research presented in the last two chapters of this dissertation also shows that Forster was not the first writer to produce an essentialist idea of India; he has the entirety of the Indutva tradition stemming back to
Sir William Jones behind him. He is arguably one of, if not the, first to imagine Indianness as such through the medium of a novel and as we will see in the next two chapters, his seminal contribution to the Anglophone discourse of Indianness does not in any way deny the agency of writers like Rao and Roy to similarly produce Indutva narratives with their own distinctive variations and political orientations.
Chapter 3 Raja Rao’s *The Serpent and the Rope*

3 Preface

Although *A Passage to India* portrays the final parting of Aziz and Fielding as a conclusive statement on the impossibility of intercultural, British-South Asian relations, the fact remains that Forster himself enjoyed numerous close friendships with South Asians, especially writers, and one of them was with Raja Rao. In 1964, Rao led the call for a collection of literary tributes by South Asian writers. In his piece, Rao writes, “nobody has done more for my writing than Forster. He has given me a status which I would not have without him” (“By Raja Rao” 32). Forster is said to have assisted Rao in publishing his first two novels, and he was also a source of literary inspiration. At a celebration of Forster’s eighty-fifth birthday, Rao praised *The Hill of Devi*, which had just been published, as “one of the most Indian books in this century” (28). Rao would also go on to ennoble Forster as a “saint.”

In terms of fiction, there are many aspects of Rao’s vision of Indianness in *The Serpent and the Rope* that echo Forster’s in *A Passage to India*. Both novels present their Indutva narratives with similar tropes: i.e., caste-as-*varna*; Neo-Vedantic oneness; the impersonal; centripetality; and the civilizational contest between Indianness and History. Yet, there are also clear differences between these visions of Indianness. For one, *The*

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46 Forster’s endorsement of Rao is included on the back cover to the New Directions edition of *Kanthapura*: “Many who know the real India – among them E. M. Forster – have called Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* one of the finest novels to come out of that country.”

47 Rao writes: “To speak of Forster is, in a way, to speak of a saint. Not a saint of God, but an anthropocentric apostle – to whom the intellectual appetites of man, the obese vocabulary of boys, the indiscrete discretions of Indians, the violence of Italians, the passions of a Maharaja, the awkward straightness of an Englishman, so many faces and despairs, are signs of an internal music, of a pure human truth, aspects of an earthly logos” (15).
Serpent and the Rope does not indulge in the perceptions of outsiders, at least not to the extent that Forster does in A Passage to India. As a result, Rao’s Indianness is never characterized as a “muddle.” Secondly, while the varnic notion of the Brahmin as a figure of ritual authority is similarly integral to Serpent, Rao places a stronger emphasis on the subjectivity of the Brahmin as a guru and therefore a pedagogical authority; this emphasis is also coupled with a lack of references to Shudra and Dalit subjects. Thirdly, while Forster uses the collective scene of a religious festival as the primary site of Indianness, Rao explores his Indutva ideal through a narrative of personal and intimate relationships with various European and Indian women. As a result, Rao’s allegory of Indianness in The Serpent and the Rope is explicitly gendered and heterosexist. Fourthly, while both novels place a Brahminical character at the centre of their Indutva narrative, Rama has vocal agency as a first-person narrator. Thus, where Godbole tends to be characterized as silent, cryptic and peculiar from a distance, Rama is introspective, but verbose and pedantic. Unfortunately, these stylistic differences make The Serpent and the Rope less pleasurable to read.\(^48\) That said, they also foreground the metaphysical aspects of Rama’s Indutva vision in ways that are far more direct than A Passage to India. As a result, these aspects have made Indianness central to Rao’s literary reputation – at least among scholars. As Tabish Khair argues, “one has to note that Rao, more than any other Indian writer, has received glowing reviews attesting to the essential Indianness of his art” (205). It is partly because of this reputation that The Serpent and the Rope sparked my own scholarly pursuit of Indianness and much of what I have explored in the other chapters of this dissertation is on the basis of having researched Rao’s novel first.

The Serpent and the Rope represents a pivotal event in Rao’s literary career. Published in 1960, it was his first work of English-language fiction to follow the short story collection

\(^{48}\) As M. Letizia Alterno points out, this opinion (not hers) is perhaps one of the reasons why there are no samples of Rao’s fictional work featured in Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West’s canon-defining anthology, Mirrorwork: 50 Years of Indian Writing, 1947-1997 (Alterno 10-12). In the New Yorker piece which was later re-published as the “Introduction” to Mirrorwork, Kanthapura is given a minor acknowledgement in Rushdie’s preface but its author’s style is critiqued as “grandiloquent and archaic” and therefore unworthy of inclusion in the anthology (57).
Cow of the Barricades (1947), and the first novel after Kanthapura (1938). During this hiatus, Rao divorced his first wife (Camille Mouly), participated alongside Gandhi in the Indian independence movement, visited various pilgrimage sites, took vows of silence, and eventually became the disciple of the south Indian, Vedantin mystic-philosopher, Sri Atmananda. These life experiences are partly fictionalized in The Serpent and the Rope. The novel similarly opens with the crisis of Rama’s marriage to Madeline (like Camille, a citizen of France) and it leads to the denouement of his decision to pursue a life of discipleship under an unnamed guru in south India; parts of the novel also follow a similar reverse-diasporic movement with Rama migrating from a settled life in Europe to seeking a homecoming in the subcontinent. Yet, a key difference between Rao’s life and Rama’s first-person narrative is that the latter is set in a postcolonial context – specifically in the mid-1950s, around the time of Queen Elizabeth II’s coronation. This historical event is key to this chapter’s discussion of The Serpent and the Rope; it is the event through which Rama prophesies the globalization of Indianness. Thus, where Forster imagines the Gokul Ashtami as a heterotopic and Spiritual site deep inside the margins of India’s princely states, Rao’s novel re-imagines Indianness as a civilizational essence that is not exclusive to the Indian subcontinent and as we will see below, it is both absent from and forgotten by the postcolonial Indian nation-state, yet in the process of being remembered and revived in the post-imperial West.

The discussion of Indianness in The Serpent and the Rope in this chapter is developed over the course of five sections: the first three deal primarily with Rama’s romantic affairs, and the last two deal with his critical observations of India’s postcolonial modernity and the Queen’s coronation. Section 3.1 begins with an exploration of Rama and Madeline’s marital crisis. Although the novel mystifies a singular cause, I argue that the reasons for this marital crisis are rooted in a combination of Madeline’s Orientalism (as depicted through her attraction to Buddhism) and more importantly, her dualistic approach to the Other (Eastern and otherwise). Because dualism (dvaita) is the obverse of Rama’s Neo-Vedantic philosophy of non-dualistic, brahman-ical oneness (advaita), the crisis of the marriage proves to be rooted in the couple’s philosophical and specifically metaphysical differences. However, for Rama, these differences are also civilizational and thus, he invokes “India” as a primary factor in the failure of their marriage.
Section 3.2 turns to the episode of Rama’s affair with Savithri. Contrary to the dominant view of Rao’s scholarly readers, Savithri is read as a character no less dvaitic than Madeline; this is particularly apparent in her interpretations of the gandharva marriage ritual she performs with Rama as well as the broader issue of bhakti that serves as the rhetorical basis of their union. Thus, despite Savithri’s claim of being a “Hindu woman”, she does not meet Rama’s standards of Indianness. Section 3.3 examines how Rama uses his experiences with both women to map out a civilizational geography of the world, where the West is historical-materialist, the East is the Vedantic site of Indianness and in between is the space of deviant “poetic” religions such as Savithri’s bhakti and Madeline’s Buddhism. The quality of the “poetic” further marginalizes Madeline’s place within Rama’s Indutva narrative. Savithri, on the other hand, transcends the “poetic” though not (as many critics argue) on the grounds of her “Indian” ethnicity or nationality, but rather her willingness to be disciplined as Rama’s disciple. It is discipline under a guru as such that serves as Rama’s template for measuring the Indianness of all gendered relationships in the novel.

Section 3.4 takes Rama’s lukewarm relationships with Pratap (Savithri’s fiancée) as well as his own sisters as the basis for his critiques of modern, postcolonial India as a nation devoid of Indianness – that is, of its Vedantic, civilizational essence. While the narrative depicts Rama leaving Europe for a life of discipleship under a guru in Travancore, India, it also depicts Rama becoming a guru to his post-divorce, European family, particularly Madeline’s cousin Catherine and her daughter Vera; this diasporic portrait signals the rebirth of Indianness in the West. In Section 3.5, this allegory of Indutva rebirth is developed further through a reading of the Queen’s coronation scene. The latter carries symbolic significance as a historical event where History is transcended and varnic order is in the process of being established across both Europe and postcolonial India. This scene is also read from the non-fictional, Neo-Vedantic perspective of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and his own prophecy on the globalization of varnic Indianness in a postcolonial world.
3.1 Madeline and the Loss of Indianness

The marriage of Rama and Madeline is introduced in the first chapter of the novel as a crisis in media res. One of the first events that Rama chronicles of this crisis is the early death of their first child. As the novel progresses, he reveals various instances of emotional estrangement, sexual violence, his extra-marital affairs, the death of a second child and finally, divorce. The couple’s marital crisis is recounted wholly from Rama’s perspective, so it is no surprise that he attributes the essence of their problems mostly to Madeline. What is unique about this narrative is that these problems are depicted essentially as a matter of Rama’s religious, philosophical, and civilizational differences with his wife.

Madeline is a French woman with a Catholic upbringing, but it is through her courtship with Rama that she develops a strong interest in Eastern philosophy. This interest compels her to pursue Buddhism and gradually seek her own conversion to the faith without the aid of any priestly or scholarly guides, a choice that is met with Rama’s quiet disapproval throughout the bulk of the novel. Buddhism, for Rama, is not really an “Indian” religion. He acknowledges its subcontinental origins, but he also sees it as a religion that failed to thrive in classical India. For him, Buddhism gained prominence solely through its diasporic spread to other cultures and societies. We will examine Rama’s critiques of Buddhism as well as bhakti Hinduism later on in section 3.3. I want to first focus on the distinctiveness of Madeline’s approach to Buddhism and explore why this creates an irreversible rift in their marriage, and how this rift acquires an allegorical resonance for the novel’s meditations on Indianness as a point of civilizational difference.

One might read Madeline’s attraction to Buddhism as an Orientalist desire to know the East. Her interest is partly stimulated when Rama “introduce[s] her to Indian history” (21). He describes her enthusiasm:

49 Her sense of desire relates to the literal definition of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Orientalism as a scholarly interest in non-Western civilizations. However, this definition is as relevant to the characterization of Madeline as it is to Rama given that they are both working academics: Madeline teaches “History at the Collège” (21); and Rama is a doctoral student completing his dissertation on “the
her joy was so great that she started researching on the idea of the Holy Grail. There is an old theory that the Holy Grail was a Buddhist conception – that the cup of Christ was a Buddhist relic which the Nestorians took over and brought to Persia… The Holy Grail also gave Madeline’s sense of geography a natural movement. She loved countries and epochs not our own. (21)

Both Buddhism and the Holy Grail are thus approached by Madeline as metonyms that help establish the means of a symbolic connection between Hinduism and Catholicism and more broadly, of East and West. In the same introductory chapter, Rama also examines Madeline’s desire for such connections through the metaphor of bridges: “Like all melancholic people, Madeline loved bridges. She felt that Truth was always on the other side” (my italics 14). For Madeline, Buddhism represents one such “bridge” and it is also articulated here as a symbolic means of establishing connections between various conceptual forms of Self and Other.

Before going further, one must be careful about conflating Madeline’s Orientalism with more violent forms of colonial will-to-power. In my view, Madeline is distinctly a liberal Orientalist. She is a European woman, a citizen of a country with a long history of imperialism in Asia, Africa and Americas, but it is also evident that she lacks a strong ideology of colonial or racial supremacy. In literary fiction and non-fiction, her analogues are not the white, female antagonists of Tayeb Salih’s Season of Migration to the North and Leroi Jones’ Dutchman, or even the case studies of Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks. Rao does not present her as a symbolic agent of colonial or racial dominance, exercising her will-to-power through the framework of a heterosexual, inter-cultural romance. Rather, Madeline is much more comparable to the liberal Orientalists of A Passage to India: i.e., Fielding, Mrs. Moore and most importantly, Adela Quested, in their desire to see and know the “real India”. Fielding’s characters are similarly disinterested in racial or colonial hierarchies. For Forster, their “pose of ‘seeing India’” is not “a form of

Albigensian heresy” with the aims of establishing an Indian connection – “Jain or maybe Buddhist” – to the history of the Cathars (17).
ruling India” and to insist on this sight-knowledge-power relationship is to fall to the same level of folly and ignorance that Forster’s satirizes through his characterization of Aziz as the beholder of this view (291-292). One would miss the complexity of Madeline’s characterization by subjecting her to a similarly vulgar postcolonial reading. Rama’s problems with Madeline have more to do with how her Orientalist interest in Buddhism measures up against his beliefs in non-dualist, Neo-Vedantic metaphysics.

A good place to begin exploring Rama’s critique is through Madeline’s rhetorical approach to the idea of Otherness. As seen above, Madeline’s style of thought is marked by forms of reversal. This style is complicated further when she goes on to articulate the concept of the Other as an object of empathy and identification. Rama explains,

sometimes her warm Southern blood would boil as never my thin Brahmin blood would, and when she was indignant – and always for some just cause – whether about the injustice done to teachers at the Lycée de Moulin, or the pitiful intrigue in some provincial miners’ union at Lens or St Etienne, she would first grow warm and then cold with anger, and burst into tears, and weep a whole hour. This also explains how during the occupation she was closer to the Communists than to the Catholics or Socialists, though she hated tyranny of all sorts. What I think Madeline really cared for was a disinterested devotion to any cause, and she loved me partly because she felt wronged by the British, and because she would, in marrying me, know and identify herself with a great people. (20)

By emphasizing and identifying with India, the Communists, the miners, etc., Madeline reconstructs the subjectivity of all such cultural, social and political Others as “great people,” and thus the oppressed take on the position of a dominant Self within the sphere of her imagination.

Yet, in the context of her marriage, the fact remains that Madeline never comes close to taking on the dominant subjectivity of a “Hindu” or “Indian”. She either chooses a symbolic “bridge” of metonymic connection (Buddhism or the Holy Grail) or she ironically retranslates her white, French, European identity as the true Other of her
worldview. This latter gesture is expressed in ways both romantic and destructive. In one instance, Rama recalls a conversation over racial differences:

lying by Madeline it was she who remarked, ‘Look at this pale skin beside your golden one. Oh, to be born in a country where tradition is so alive… that even the skin of her men is like some royal satin, softened and given a new shine through the rubbing of ages.’ (21)

Madeline’s utterance represents a reversal of colonial race ideology, as she regards the colour of her skin as a sign of aesthetic and therefore cultural inferiority. Much later in the novel, her sentiments turn masochistic as she tells Rama: “‘for you, a woman is still the other, the unknown, the strange, the miracle. You could never show the familiarity European men show towards their wives. You worship women even if you torture them. But I like to be tortured and to be your slave’” (100). While Madeline’s rhetoric of submission subscribes to the hetero-normative stereotype of gendered power relations, it also flirts with a reversal of power across Orientalist differences. Thus, Madeline’s desire to be “tortured” as Rama’s “slave” is doubly resonant as a masochistic fantasy where the European Other is disempowered by the Indian Self.

In the same passage, Rama responds to Madeline’s “slave” fantasy through the means of quiet reflection. He tells us, “No, of course I did not want a slave. I wanted a companion of pilgrimage, for if you gaze long at the mountain, where after twist on twist of the bridal path the bells ring and the evening of worship has come, you want to lie at the feet of God together and unalone” (100). These two passages from Madeline and Rama could be taken as a contrast between an Orientalist and supposedly ‘authentic’ understanding of Indian marriage, but Rama’s emphasis is ultimately on metaphysical, rather than cultural or political, differences. Thus, the problem with Madeline’s Orientalist style has nothing to do with aspects of colonial will-to-power. Rather, his point is that her Orientalism, though liberal, is too grounded in dualistic thinking, as is evident in her approach to Indian history, culture, religion, and identity as well as her twin desire to reverse the referents of Self and Other and to manifest a “bridge” between all such dualities. The problem then is not that she is an Orientalist, but that her Orientalist style has a dualist
(arguably *dvaita*) basis. Conversely, her particular expression of Orientalism serves as a trope for that which Rama views as the key problem in their marriage.

Of course, Rama’s approach to Indianness is also highly Orientalist and this is particularly evident throughout his discourses on India’s civilizational essence, let alone his praise of certain Orientalist scholars, throughout the novel. What is different is a matter of style – that is a non-dualistic style, one that does not seek a “bridge” because there are ultimately no differences to be bridged in Rama’s view. This style is enunciated above in his response to Madeline’s view of Indian marriage, but also in the response to Madeline’s comparison of their different skin pigmentations. To the latter, Rama responds,

> I, however, being so different, never really noted any differences. To me difference was inborn – like my being the eldest son of my father, or like my grandfather being the Eight-Pillared House Ramakrishnayya, and you had to just mention his name anywhere in Mysore State, even to the Maharaja, and you were offered a seat, a wash, and a meal, and a coconut-and-shawl adieu. To me, difference was self-created, and so I accepted that Madeline was different. (21-22)

As with the previous passage, Rama’s explanation places a strong rhetorical emphasis on the image of ritual practice, but the conceptual emphasis here is on the idea of a non-dualistic Self, one whose identity is constructed without a parallel construction of the Other. This Self is oriented towards an affirmation of the higher Self – that is, the oneness of *brahman* – and in ways that echo Rama’s vision of marriage as an impersonal relationship with the divinity on the altar (as opposed to a personal one with each partner) and therefore a recognition of *brahman* as the ultimate truth.

In his “Introduction” to *The Best of Raja Rao*, Makarand Paranjape raises the question of “why does the marriage of Rama and Madeline disintegrate?” and he admits that most critics have come up with “plausible” answers but none are truly persuasive because such answers “are not perceived by the characters themselves” (xi). However, for Rama, there is one answer that is readily evident to him, if not Madeline, in which the marriage is
viewed essentially as a crisis of metaphysical differences. Paranjape highlights this perspective in his brief reading of the novel:

Madeline also regards Truth as something outside herself, something that has to be striven for in order to be realized. Her dualism is the philosophical opposite of Rama’s nondualism. Rama believes, following the Advaita Vedanta, that the self is identical to Truth as the wave is part of the sea, and that separateness is illusion, like the illusion in which a rope is mistaken for a serpent. (xii)

However, in the context of this dissertation, I would go further and add that Rama’s view of his metaphysical differences with Madeline can also be translated symbolically as the grounds for civilizational differences – that is, differences between civilizations, rather than between Rama and Madeline as individuals. From this allegorical perspective, the dissolution of his marriage to the French, Catholic-turned-Buddhist Madeline is ironically an affirmation of the ideals that underlie the essence of Indian civilization. This equation between (Neo-)Vedanta and Indianness is highlighted in the couple’s last dialogue within the novel. As Madeline begins,

‘What is it [that] separated us, Rama?’
‘India.’
‘India. But I am Buddhist.’
‘That is why Buddhism left India. India is impitoyable.’
‘But one can become a Buddhist?’
‘Yes, and a Christian and a Muslim as well.’
‘Then?’
‘One can never be converted to Hinduism.’
‘You mean one can only be born a Brahmin?’
‘That is – an Indian,’ I added, as an explanation of India. (336)

On one hand, Rama’s concept of Indianness almost sounds more radically right-wing than that which V. D. Savarkar imagines in Hindutva. For the latter, Buddhism can be accepted as a “Hindu” religion because it is indigenous to the Indian subcontinent. By contrast, for Rao’s protagonist, Buddhism is neither “Hindu” nor “Indian” because its
dualistic sensibility has no place in a non-dualistic and therefore Other-less civilization. For Rama, acts of pity and compassion are grounded on a dualistic relationship between two people or subjects. As a result, his idea of India is of an “impitoyable” civilization because Indian metaphysics is non-dualistic and conversely, “dualism is anti-Indian” (43). This sense of metaphysical essentialism is also further developed in relationship to caste and specifically the concept of jati with its emphasis on “birth”. Thus, when Rama replies to Madeline’s last question, suggestively treating Brahmin-ness as Indianness, it can almost read as an analogue to Savarkar’s notion of Hindu India as a single jati race, exclusive to all with birth ties to the soil of the subcontinent.\(^5\) However, as we will see below, to read Rama (or Rao) as an analogue to Savarkar is to mistake Indutva for Hindutva.

There are at least three points on which Rama clearly distinguishes his worldview from that of Savarkar’s Hindutva ideology. The first is that Rama’s style of essentialism is clearly with regards to metaphysical principles, rather than ethnic or racial origins. Secondly, there is a complete lack of “Hindu” rhetoric in Rama’s narrative throughout the novel. Rama’s concern is with Indianess, rather than Hinduness; this is illustrated in the dialogue above when Rama corrects Madeline on the definition of being an “Indian” in contrast to Hindu, let alone Brahmin. Finally, while Rama stresses that “one can never convert to Hindu i's" he does not exactly suggest that Indianess is exclusive to those who are born into a Hindu jati; the latter is Madeline’s suggestion, albeit expressed in the form of inquiry.

I argue that Rama’s idea of Indianess as well as Brahmin-ness has more to do with a constructed sense of subjectivity, one that derives from Hindu philosophy but is not necessarily restricted to Hindu religious identity or practice. He defines his concept of Brahminical subjectivity in the first sentences of the novel: “I was born a Brahmin – that is devoted to Truth and all that. ‘Brahmin is he who knows Brahman’, etc.” (1). The same

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\(^5\) Savarkar writes, “[The Hindus] are not only a rashtriya but also a jati. The word jati derived from the root jan to produce, means a brotherhood, a race determined by a common origin, – possessing a common blood. All Hindus claim to have in their veins the blood of the mighty race incorporated with and descended from the Vedic faiths, the Sindhus” (73-74).
definition is then reiterated on the last page of the novel (341). Rama’s notions of Brahminism also appear to be detached from the concept of caste-as-jati. This is illustrated in the episode of his trip to Benares, when Rama critiques the local Brahmins:

The Brahmins are still muttering something. Two or three of them have already washed their feet in the river and are coming up, looking at their navels or their fire gold rings. They must be wondering what silver we would offer… I would rather have thrown the rupees to the begging monkeys than to the Brahmins. (12)

The Brahmins of Benares are materialistic and corrupt, but they are privileged to behave in this manner because they belong to a privileged jati community. In another example, Rama dissociates himself from his south Indian family and their caste community’s prejudices against non-Brahmins and non-Hindus: “‘In Bangalore,’ remarked Little Mother, ‘it is not as in Muslim Hyderabad. Here girls can go about with boys and nobody thinks anything of it. After all it’s Brahmin-land,” declared Little Mother, forgetting that the benign Congress régime had abolished caste distinctions” (285). Casteism, as Rama suggests, is antiquated – at least when it involves the notion of caste-as-jati or the oppression of “Untouchables” and other lower-caste Hindus – and this view is consistent with the Neo-Vedantic thought of Vivekananda, Gandhi and even the Hindutva ideologue Golwalkar.

Having said that, it is evident that Rama is invested in a Brahminical style as well in as other modes of caste subjectivity that preserve the hierarchical structure of varna while observing a sense of dharma, thus quietly invoking the modern Neo-Vedantic discourse of varnashramadharma. For him, being a Brahmin involves being committed to fulfilling the duties of a Brahmin. These duties are essential to the dharma of a Brahmin and are primarily oriented around the task of knowing brahman and providing guidance to others on the basis of this knowledge. Brahminism as such is defined as a position or privilege of pedagogical, rather than ritual, authority; again, this is a key point of difference between Rao and Forster’s conceptions of Brahminical subjectivity.

Returning to Rama’s last dialogue with Madeline, one can see how Rama articulates this concept of Brahminical subjectivity further as an aspect of Indianness, where to be a
Brahmin subject is equivalent to an “Indian” subjectivity. Unlike the Hindutva of Savarkar, Rama’s Neo-Vedantic idea of Brahminical or varnic Indianness is rooted in acts of dharma, rather than in race, ethnicity, community, or birthright. Conversely, Rama also argues that to know brahman is equal to knowing the essence of India. This notion is also developed through the course of the same dialogue with Madeline. Beginning with a question from the latter, Rao writes,

‘Your India, then, Rama, is in time and space?’
‘No. It is contiguous with time and space, but is anywhere, everywhere.’
‘I don’t understand.’
‘It stands, as it were, vertical to space and time, and is present at all points.’ (336)

“India” is thus articulated as universal, transcendent, and non-dualistic. As Rama nears the conclusion of his dialogue, he further qualifies this idea of Indianness as a state of metaphysical oneness where “all things merge, all thoughts and perceptions, in knowledge” (336). Indianness is consequently distinguished as a higher form of knowledge, as connoted through Rama’s Sanskrit rhetoric: “Jnanam is India” (336). A few lines later, this idea of metaphysical Indianness is further elevated as not only the essence of Indian civilization, but as that which raises “India” allegorically as the subject of a global pedagogical authority: that is, of India as “the Guru of the world” (336). All in all, “India” is defined through a tropology that draws on caste, duty, pedagogical authority, non-dualist metaphysics, and civilizational (sans racial or ethnic) essentialism.

Most importantly for the plot of The Serpent and the Rope, this tropology of Indianness is attributed by Rama as the central cause of his marital crisis: Madeline’s subjectivity was not “Indian” enough for Rama and as a wife, she failed to help him cultivate himself as a more “Indian” male subject.

While the plot of Rama and Madeline’s unsuccessful marriage serves as the primary focus of the novel, its greater significance is with regards to the loss and recovery of Indianness – again, Indianness as an episteme (jnanam) and a mode of subjectivity that enables a discourse on the relationship between individual, civilizational, and metaphysical levels of being. This ideal of Indianness is lost through Rama’s marriage to a French, Catholic-turned-Buddhist, liberal Orientalist, and essentially dualist (dvaitic)
woman, but it is recovered ironically through the complete dissolution of the marriage. Interestingly enough, much of the scholarship on *The Serpent and the Rope* tends to focus on this tragicomic aspect of recovery. For example, as Brij M. Bhalla writes, “So this divorce is also a discovery. The obvious tragedy is actually an enrichment and affirmation in the sense that [the] identity crisis has been successfully resolved” (105). An example of the novel’s more celebratory reception is in the reading by C. D. Narasimhaiah, one of the first critics to champion Rao’s writing: “It is a tragedy in which Ramaswamy and Madeline are not the only ones that are involved; they, it seems, are types of modern man and woman groping their way, while caught up in the endless flux of life. And this novel shows one way, *the essential Indian way*” (my italics 110). In one instance, Narasimhaiah interprets “the essential Indian way” according to Neo-Vedanta and the principle of non-dualism and monistic oneness: “a tradition which recognizes identities as well as differences and respects them, instead of destroying them, which is not to perceive the unity of life” (82). In a similar tone, K. Unnikrishnan places an emphasis on another Neo-Vedantic trope, the *guru* as a figure of pedagogical authority, as a civilizational essence in his reading of the novel:

> perhaps the most significant aspect of Raja Rao as a master of Indian English fiction is his keen perception and intense awareness of the Guru principle operating in the Indian social psyche. The guru-disciple relationship is a dominant shaping force of the hereditary mental disposition that may be termed Indianness or the Indian ethos. (142)

M. K. Naik, an early champion of Rao’s fiction, echoes this observation when he praises Rama’s recovery of “the Indian way” and how it “commands the mediation of the guru or the spiritual teacher who alone can [guide] us through the flux of life” (1972 110). Naik also reads Rama as a heroic “Indian” character whose individual triumphs symbolize the larger one of Indian civilization: “Rama’s total personality, which has a modern representative of a race surviving over thousands of years, has no doubt lost much in the process, but has at the same time, preserved, at least to some extent, its inner strength” (113).
One might speculate that these feel-good affirmations of both Rama and Rao’s Indianness are reflective of a nationalist or patriotic sentiment, aiming to seek a civilizational discourse of the Indian spirit in order to ground the postcolonial modernity of India as a modern nation-state on the basis of both tradition as well as what Partha Chatterjee denotes as the Spiritual domain of nationalist imagination. Rumina Sethi makes this argument in *Myths of the Nation*:

I see Raja Rao as an intellectual caught within the insecurity resulting from a repudiation of metaphysics during the nationalist phase. In his post-independence writing, in comparison, there appears to be a self-conscious return to a system of Hindu ethics which is inconsistent with the broad democratic principles on which the freedom struggle was based. For the brahminic elites, the continuity of tradition could not be ensured in any other way. (156)

While I do agree with Sethi’s observation on the synchrony of postcolonial Indian modernity and Brahminical neo-traditionalism throughout twentieth-century, my reading of Rao’s work compels me to believe that there is indeed something genuine, rather than manipulative, about him and his protagonist’s obsession with Indianness because it is envisioned as a pursuit of absolute Truth; it is an expression of religious and philosophical belief, rather than a desire for power in political and economic sphere. The outcome of his Indutva vision is discomforting to say the least, but it is not the empty rhetoric of Hindutva nostalgia for a pre-colonial/pre-Mughal past.

That said, the central problem with Rao’s Indutva vision is that his protagonist is in denial of how this will-to-Truth produces a will-to-power and privilege, and how this will resonates at the levels of gender and especially caste. The latter is emphasized, but not at the expense of the former, but rather because there is a general lack of serious discussion around the issue of caste and especially varna as a key trope of Rama’s Neo-Vedantic, guru-centric ideal of civilizational Indianness. This lack echoes the problem of how scholars have read Godbole and the Gokul Ashtami in *A Passage to India* by placing the issue of caste in a similar blind spot. That said, this lack is also specifically reflective of the critics reviewed above. As Meenakshi Mukherjee points out in *The Twice Born*
**Fiction**, a scholar’s treatment (or lack of treatment) of caste reflects the degree to which he or she personally identifies with Rama and Rao’s worldview:

Those who share Ramaswamy’s Brahminical background, his traditional childhood of hymns and rituals, and his advaitic grounding, will easily identify with him. Those who do not have this background will inevitably feel uncomfortable at his excessive emotionalism and with regards to certain objects and gestures… This diametric opposition in reactions has been present in all evaluations of *The Serpent and the Rope*. (96)

I place myself in the category of the latter, but where others have dealt with their own discomfort by addressing issues of gender (Esha Dey) or nationalism (Rumina Sethi), my focus here is on caste as well as its tropological relationship to Neo-Vedanta and civilizational Indianess. In order to explore this further, I will now turn to the other central character of Rama’s narrative: Savithri, the north Indian, expatriate woman with whom Rama pursues a platonic, extra-marital affair as well as a ritual marriage.

Just as Rama’s marriage to Madeline represents the symbolic site of Rama’s “Indian” loss, critics have argued that his affair with Savithri similarly represents the site of his “Indian” recovery. To highlight the sense of repetition in the scholarship, I will summarize this history of interpretation up through the following list of references: “It is Savithri who draws Rama out of his confusion and guides him towards Knowledge” (Sethi 159); “Ramaswamy’s relationship with Savithri serves to make him fully aware of his spiritual heritage. It hastens his desire to search for the Absolute, for the Truth” (Dissanayake 599); and “It is his encounter with Savithri that makes Rama fully and truly conscious of his true spiritual heritage, and his love for her becomes a steppingstone to his quest for the ultimate realization of Truth” (Naik 90). In the case of Narasimhaiah, Savithri is further idealized because she, unlike Madline, is ethnically Indian: “he sees in Savithri the finest embodiment of his own tradition… her kunkum, chowli, sari, [and] blackbeads lend her an auspiciousness which is knowledge of Bharatruhari and the songs
she sings of Mira” (Narasimhaiah 115). While Rama’s attraction to Savithri is indeed motivated by an attempt to recover his idea of Indianness and his affair does bring him towards a deeper understanding of this ideal, it is also evident that Rama comes to see Savithri for her dualistic (dvaitic) style of seeing and being in the world. Thus, despite their ethnic differences, Savithri and Madeline are characterized as belonging to the same metaphysical sisterhood, and they have more in common with each other than what Rao’s scholarly readers have been willing to admit.

The next section will explore Savithri’s dualist sensibility further through her relationship with Rama, her rhetorical claim to a female, “Hindu” subjectivity, and how both she and he attempt to recover a traditionalist sense of Indianness through their performance of a ritual marriage. The ritual fails to produce a long-lasting marriage, but it is nevertheless significant because it reveals Savithri’s limits as a “Hindu” woman as well as the limits of Hindu mythology and bhakti discourse within Rama’s discourse of imagined Indianness.

3.2 Savithri and the Limits of a “Hindu” Woman

Savithri’s character is first introduced to the novel as the daughter of a former princely state ruler (Raja Raghubir Singh of Surajpur) and a student of English literature at Cambridge. She is further characterized as a modern Indian woman, liberated from the social constraints of family and “tradition.” At Cambridge, she smokes heavily, dances wildly at jazz clubs, and flirts with her communist male friends. She is also romantically involved with a Muslim classmate, Hussain Hamdain – a taboo relationship given her “Hindu” and nationally “Indian” background. She makes her acquaintance with Rama through her fiancée, Pratap Singh, a north Indian man of a relatively similar ethnic, class, and caste background. Despite their official engagement, Savithri has refused to see

51 The reference to Bhartrihari is an error on Narasimhaiah’s part. Savithri is more often than not identified with Mirabai – an important distinction given Bhartrihari’s use of Sanskrit and Mirabai’s use of the vernacular. Rather, it is Madeline’s niece Vera that has the privilege of being exposed to Rama’s discourses on the legendary Sanskrit grammarian.
Pratap and has vocally expressed her disinterest in him to her own family. In response, Pratap introduces Rama and Savithri to each other as an attempt to save his future marriage prospects through Rama’s guidance and stabilizing influence. Unsurprisingly, Rama develops a deep, though wholly platonic, attraction to Savithri, and her disinterest in Pratap persists throughout the majority of the novel.

In his first meeting with Savithri, Rama’s impression of her is negative and dismissive, but the most interesting point is that he translates this impression through a rhetoric of cultural difference along the lines of regional geography (north/south India) and cultural temporality (modernity/tradition):

I felt I did not like her, she was too modern for me; she had already started smoking. If I remember right she was fixing up a dance engagement on the telephone. I could not understand these northerners going from strict purdah to this extreme modernism with such haste. We in the south were more sober, and very distant. We lived by tradition. (33-4)

Rama eventually changes his opinion and the shift is coincidental with the couple’s movements in geographic space. The impressions above are from Rama’s first meeting with Savithri at her parents’ home in Surajpur, but when she comes to visit him in the diasporic setting of Europe, she reveals another side to her, one that is more introspective, philosophical, and poetic. Her outward displays of hedonism thus prove to be nothing more than a veil over the inner life of a private, meditative self, and one that she otherwise refuses to lift for Pratap, Hussain, or any of her other male friends. To some extent, this representation of Savithri’s veiled identity evokes Partha Chatterjee’s theory of the Material/Spiritual split that is characteristic of the imaginations of the modern Indian nationalist self, as discussed in the previous two chapters of this dissertation. The difference here is that Savithri’s predicament is representative of a postcolonial, rather than anti-colonial, nationalist, not to mention a diasporic condition. More importantly, it is represented through Rama’s perspective as Savithri’s distinctly (and therefore essentially) “northern” characteristic.
As Savithri continues to unveil her Spiritual side, he finds himself attracted to the possibilities of metaphysical compatibility:

She was herself, the proof that night did not imply the day or day the night, that France was this and so India was not this, that she was a girl, a woman, and I a man – all seemed a known mystery, an acknowledgement. She could be filled with silence, and a steadiness filled with air then, as though the world was made real because one never saw it. This only explained why Savithri so often closed her eyes, and when she spoke, it was as if she spoke to the me that I did not know, but the me indeed, the only one, which hearing did not hear, seeing did not see, and knowing did not know but was knowledge itself. (129-30)

Savithri is thus perceived by Rama as an introspective woman in search of an inner truth: that is, a truth that Rama assumes to be non-dualist, monistic, Neo-Vedantic, and therefore “Indian”. This truth also equals the elevated, Sanskritic sense of jnanam that Rama claims to have lost through his marriage to Madeline.

However, it should also be noted that Savithri’s act of self-revelation is subject to variables of her own perception and therefore the passage above does not serve as a definitive statement on her essential nature or attitude. As illustrated throughout the episode of their affair, Savithri has her own perception of Rama. This is evident from the first letter she writes to him from England: “It was wonderful seeing you in our home. The vulgarity of the surroundings I hope did not hurt your sensibilities. We in the north are new to civilization. I want to see you. May I see you? I want to know France. I want to know India”” (109). For Savithri, the opportunity of getting to know Rama better represents one of knowing India, though specifically the idea of India that is troped through the rhetoric of Indian regionalism. The “north” represents “vulgarity”, the antithesis of “civilization” and therefore a strong point of contrast to the south. Savithri’s recognition of the south and her devaluation of the north signifies an internalization of Rama’s worldview, but it also echoes the dynamics of reversal that underlie Madeline’s sense of liberal Orientalism, where the Other is similarly romanticized. The main difference is that Savithri’s romanticism operates on a north-south axis, rather than a
more conventional one of East and West. This distinction is theoretically important because it highlights the lack of a conceptual rhetoric within postcolonial theory to classify this style of thought; it is dualistic, but technically not Orientalist.

The narrative of Rama and Savithri’s affair is further complicated by diasporic factors. Both characters are in pursuit of recovering an ontological sense of Indianness, and they both share a common regional style of viewing the south as the site of authentic Indianness. The authenticity of the south is also predicated on a romanticism of Hindu mythology, ritualism, and other such aspects of pre-colonial South Asian culture. However, the grand irony is that all attempts at knowing and therefore recovering Indianness as such are set in a geographic space outside the Indian subcontinent, let alone clearly situated in the former imperial centres of the West. Rama’s first encounter with Savithri does indeed take place in India (albeit in the northern setting of her father’s home), but the first time she reveals her Spiritual self is when they meet at his home with Madeline in Aix-en-Provence – interestingly, a southern region of France. When his relations with Madeline hit their most destructive and violent lows, Rama pursues Savithri at Cambridge. The setting of England is significant for a number of reasons, including the episode of the Queen’s coronation. This use of a diasporic setting also has a more precise effect of producing a space for Rama’s critiques of romanticism and thus bringing his differences with Savithri to light.

If it was in France that Rama discovered another side to Savithri, it is in England where that side is fully revealed. Amidst the setting of an Italian restaurant, she engages him to play out a dialogue of make-believe, fantasizing a life of eternal union through the mythological archetypes of Shiva and Parvati. In an attempt to further reify this fantasy,

52 His diaries suggest acts of hatred and perhaps even rape: “November 10. ‘Today I could have destroyed Madeline, so richly, so perfumedly she hung to me. I could have spat into her mouth and called her the female of a dog.’” (165)

53 The detail is probably significant only because Italy may represent a median point on the East-West axis and therefore a position of both diasporic and civilizational liminality.
Savithri tells her would-be ascetic lover: “I am a woman… a Hindu woman” (209). She continues to identify herself in these religious terms throughout the remainder of the episode, and thus places a rhetorical emphasis on her unveiled, “Hindu” subjectivity as an essential or ontological mode of being. For Savithri, this idea of being a “Hindu” is obviously gendered, but it is also grounded in a rhetoric as well as ethos of bhakti: “A Hindu woman knows how to worship her Krishna, her Lord” (211).

Savithri continues to demonstrate her ideal of female, devotional, Hindu subjectivity when she arrives the next day at Rama’s hotel room with various articles of ritual worship: a censer, vermillion (“kunkum”), camphor, and flowers (212). By dressing herself “in a South Indian sari”, she rewrites her outward appearance according to notions of tradition, regionality, and Sanskritic civility (212). Thus, her appearance completes a chain of logic on the nature of her unveiled self: to be an Indian is to be “Hindu”, and to be a “Hindu” is to embrace the perceived authenticity of the south. While the rhetoric of “Hindu”-ness is absent from Rama’s discourses, the idea of the “south” is integral to his narrative as well as his performance in this scene. Intuiting the unspoken purpose of their meeting, Rama similarly presents himself in traditional attire – “muslin dhoti and kudtha” (212). He tells Savithri that he has spent the morning in meditation and thus once again invokes the mythical image of Shiva; she then reveals that she too has been praying to the same god.

What follows in the remainder of this carefully constructed scene is a theatrical combination of marriage ritual and religious prayer, evoking Rama’s ideal of marriage as a pilgrimage, a partnership for God. The purpose of the occasion is unspoken, but otherwise suggested through gestures:

Then she knelt before me, removed one by one my slippers and my stockings, and put them aside gently – distantly. She took flower and kunkum-water, and mumbling some song to herself, anointed my feet with them. Now she lit a camphor and placing the censer in the middle of the kunkum-water she waved the flame before my face, once, twice, and three times in arathi. After this she touched my feet with water, and made aspersions of it over her head. Kneeling
again and placing her head on my feet, she stayed there long, very long, with her breath breaking into gentle sobs. Then she gently held herself up. Taking the kunkum from the box I placed it on her brow, at the parting of her hair, and there where her bosom heaved, the abode of love. I could not touch her any more, nor could she touch me, and we stood for an isolate while. (213-4)

In the absence of verbal language, the couple’s interactions appear to be spontaneous and improvised, and especially so because there is no desire on either person’s part to identify what they are doing at any other point in the novel; in the moment leading up to it, Savithri calls it “a woman’s business” and otherwise preserves the significance of these acts under a veil of verbal silence (213).

Scholars have attempted to make sense of this episode by identifying traces of certain Hindu ritual customs that are traditionally performed by married women. Esha Dey discusses the washing of Rama’s feet as “padapuja or feet worship” (87). S. Nagarajan opens the discussion up to two more ritual possibilities. There is the “Disha-Gauri ritual (vrata)” that a woman performs for the recovery of her husband’s losses, as Draupadi did for her five Pandava husbands during their period of exile in the epic of the Mahabharata; for Savithri, the ritual would therefore signify an attempt to recover the loss of Rama’s Indianness (and consequently her own as well) in a similarly exilic context (2000 106-7). The second ritual Nagarajan suggests is that of the “Jyothistambha” where a Brahmin woman marries a dead prince to restore him to life by offering her prayers to Shiva and Parvati (107). While similar invocations of the latter are performed above, what is more interesting is how Rama and Savithri also perform a reversal of the ritual’s conventional varnic and gender pairing, as here the case is symbolically of a Brahmin man and a Kshatriya princess.

Ultimately, for me, the significance of Rama and Savithri’s interactions represent a parody, rather than a recovery, of “Indian” ritual and tradition, and this element of mockery and imitation extends to the whole episode of their affair. The referent for this parody is the tradition of a gandharva marriage, one of the eight types of conjugal union deemed legitimate in Manu. The gandharva is popularly understood as a marriage based
on mutual love and thus one that does not require the presence of an officiating priest or other such authoritative witnesses. The most well known example of such unions within Sanskrit literature (and nineteenth-century Orientalist translation by extension) is in Kalidasa’s play, *Abhijnanasakuntalam* (“The Recognition of Sakuntala”). Composed sometime in the latter half of the first millennium BCE, the play’s eponymous heroine is wooed by King Dushanta, whose methods of seduction involves a brief explanation of the *gandharva* practice and its legitimacy within their social context:

... Listen,

Many are the daughters of sages,
made by the Gandharva rite, we hear;
and once married, felicitated
with joyful acceptance by their fathers. (3.28)

In the remainder of the play’s third act, the marriage is made “legal” with the mere act of Dushanta placing a bracelet on Sakuntala’s wrist, to which she responds by calling him “lord” and therefore “husband” (3.34). The exchanges between Savithri and Rama in *The Serpent and the Rope* evokes this tradition on the grounds of mutual love without the sanction or mediation of a priest. It also carries significance with regards to law and history. Most of the episode takes place in the private space of Rama’s hotel in London. Neither Savithri nor Rama make any reference to the world outside except for the time at the beginning and the end of the episode, both of which have the temporal significance of a *muhurat* to mark the opening and closure of the ritual. The hotel room comes to function as a ritual space but also as a space outside history, arguably evoking the mythological temporality of Shiva and Parvati’s eternal union. Finally, the episode is also performed outside the conventions of British law and other such secular institutions of the modern West while *almost* succeeding in being legitimized according to the “traditional” laws of *Manu*.

I say ‘almost’ because the marriage is never fully consummated beyond the level of its ritual performance and mythological evocations. Rama anoints Savithri with vermillion and a pair of toe-rings, but his touches go no further than this. The use of the latter may echo the gesture that Dushanta makes with the toe-rings, but it also stands in sharp
contrast to the obvious display of sexual relations in *Abhijnanasakuntalam*. Such relations are never depicted in the latter, but they are made evident when Sakuntala’s pregnancy is revealed in the play’s fourth act (4.5). Thus, Rama and Savithri’s attempt to perform a *gandharva* marriage may appear as a parody of the Kalidasa model, but it is also technically outside of *Manu’s* legal code. The actual citation of the latter defines it solely as a sexual, rather than ritual, act: “When the girl and the groom have sex with each other voluntarily, that is the ‘Gandharva’ marriage based on sexual union and originating from love” (3.32). Thus, while critics may idealize Rama and Savithri’s affair for its supposed Indianness, the fact that these two modern, yet highly romantic, Indians of the diaspora are more sexually inhibited than Kalidasa’s classical hero and heroine is odd to say the least.

There are two explanations for this lack of sexuality in the mock *gandharva* episode of Rao’s novel. The first has to do with Savithri’s sudden announcement (later in the same day) that she still intends to “go back” to India “and become Mrs. Pratap Singh” (216). The admission is a reality-check on the authenticity of their ritual, but it also signifies a symbolic re-veiling of what Savithri believes to be her inner, Spiritual self. She promises Rama that in her heart she will remain his most true and devoted wife, his Parvati and his Radha, even as she returns to the call of a worldly life. She tells him: “I’ll come when you don’t need me, when you can live without me, O cenobite” (216). By addressing him with the same translated euphemism that the sixteenth-century *bhakti* poet-saint Mirabai would use for her divine Beloved, Savithri displays her desire to preserve the feeling of being situated in non-historical, mythological time. She persuades Rama to accept that their marriage will remain even if their marital bliss must occupy no more than a brief moment. This is indeed a noble sentiment, but it is ultimately Savithri who continues to remain attached to Rama as she progresses further into her marriage with Pratap.

The other aspect of this conclusion to the *gandharva* episode is that while it leaves the couple sexually repressed, it does find them spiritually satisfied, that is, in the existential sense. Rama’s touches are minimal throughout the episode and one might even argue that these acts are mediated through the use of various aforementioned ritual objects, implying that he has not touched her at all. On the other hand, it is not Savithri’s own
body but the impersonal body of the metaphysical, non-dualist Self that Rama believes he is becoming aware of. This is perhaps why he does not even acknowledge the element of physical intimacy during these moments. For him, the ritual act of touching is based on the concept of anointment and hence, the ritual-symbolic use of vermillion (*kunkum*). As he explains at an earlier point in the novel, “To anoint oneself in worshipping another is the basis of all love. We become ourself by becoming another” (82). The act of anointment produces a non-dualist awareness that puts the concepts of *bhakti*, *Self*, and *Truth* into a single equation. Thus, the couple may perform their *gandharva* as a ritual act of love, but for Rama it is the element of metaphysical awareness that ultimately redefines and authenticates it beyond the fulfillment of nostalgia or traditionalist romanticism.

Savithri’s experience of the ritual is no less intense, but there is little evidence that she values the same Neo-Vedantic ideals. Part of this is due to the obvious fact of asymmetry in the ritual, and one that is based along the lines of gender as well as gestures of the body. He touches her brow with his fingers, but she touches her head to his feet. Of course, both participants appear to be more than satisfied with this dynamic and while Savithri’s role appears to be one of servility, she accepts it as a sign of her own ritual authority.

‘Will you permit me?’ she asked, ‘Permit this, a woman’s business?’
‘Oh, no!’ I protested.
‘But it was you who told me – at home a man obeys a woman, that it’s Hindu dharma.’
‘I obey,’ I said. (213)

One would think that it is Savithri who comes out of the ritual with a deeper level of spiritual insight given the extremes to which she goes in offering so much of her physical being to Rama; when she meditates at his feet, she does so for a “long, very long” time. However, this level of insight is registered primarily through affect and emotion: “her breath breaking into gentle sobs.” Though profoundly moving, there is little to suggest that this is her response to what Rama identifies as the Truth. She anoints him but for reasons that are based in dualism: that is, to exalt his body as an Other rather than as the
site of a shared Self. Thus, her experience here is not one of mutual anointment but of genuflection, performed not with Rama as a companion for pilgrimage, but an act of worship for Rama as the godhead. As a result, for Savithri, this ritual of a *gandharva* marriage is less a form of prayer than one of devotion.

When the ritual is over, Savithri continues to draw attention to her identity as a “Hindu woman.” She addresses Rama using the mythological rhetoric of a beloved divinity: “‘Yes,’ she said; ‘This Cambridge undergraduate, who smokes like a chimney and dances to barbarian jazz, she says unto you, I’ve known my Lord for a thousand lives, from *Janam* to *Janam* have I known my Krishna…’” (214). She reiterates the sentiment again when evening sets in outside London’s Victoria Station: “‘My love, my love, my love,’ she repeated, as though it were a mantra, ‘my love and my Lord.’” (215). The two utterances are rhetorically constructed to reveal what is arguably Savithri’s essential nature. She is a woman with an internal split in her character, dividing herself along the outside-inside lines of a Material and Spiritual self, and thus a *veiled* “Hindu woman.” It might be that Savithri regards the one side of this existential split as *maya* or illusion and the other as her authentic self. It might also be that she performs this ritual to unveil that self, the self of a “Hindu woman” more devoted to the godlike object of *saguna bhakti* than either Hussain or Pratap; she is willing to offer her body to the latter, but it is to Rama that she devotes her soul. And similarly, the ritual signals a rhetorical affirmation of her pseudo-mythological status as Rama’s wife for eternity, thus affirming her love as something that exists outside history, but without actually transcending the latter. As a result, the ritual proves to be a mystical “Hindu” experience for Savithri, but it fails to produce the same level of Neo-Vedantic metaphysical awareness that Rama experiences in the episode. Thus, just as Savithri’s character is internally split, the same is true for the ritual; it means different things for each participant and this arguably generates a crisis around their respective interpretations of Hindu religiosity and tradition in contrast to Neo-Vedanta and Indianness.

The differences in Savithri’s mysticism and Rama’s metaphysics also evoke the archetypes of characters and legends that are interwoven throughout the narrative. Rama relates himself to Yagnavalkya, the legendary sage of the *Upanisads* whose name appears
on the very first page of the novel and who he invokes as an “ancestor”, related by little more than perhaps caste (7).\textsuperscript{54} According to the narrator of the “\textit{Brhadaranyaka Upanisad}”, Yagnavalkya was similarly married to two different women, Maitreyi and Katyayani: “Maitreyi was a woman who took part in theological discussions, while Katyayani’s understanding was limited to womanly matters” (4.5.11). It is with Maitreyi that he so intimately explains the non-dualistic concept of love: “One holds a husband dear, you see, not out of love for the husband; rather it is out of love for oneself (\textit{atman}) that one holds a husband dear” (2.4.5). Rama identifies with Yagnavalkya for his Vedantic wisdom, but also as a model for intimacy. Thus, he attempts to relate to Savithri as though she were a modern Maitreyi: that is, as the wife who becomes a disciple.

However, Savithri’s intentions are to identify more closely with Mirabai, the sixteenth-century, vernacular \textit{bhakti} poet-saint. Though biographical accounts vary, the general understanding of the Mirabai legend is that she was a north Indian (Rajput) princess who rebelled against her arranged marriage by claiming Krishna as her true husband.\textsuperscript{55} The reasons why Savithri might identify with this figure should be quite obvious, given her arranged marriage to Pratap, and her “Spiritual” or “Hindu” love for Rama. The issue of caste is no less significant here given that Yagnavalkya was a Brahmin, whereas Mirabai would have been categorized as belonging to one of the \textit{Kshatriya} castes. To some extent, these \textit{varnic} differences serve to classify metaphysics as a Brahminical episteme and \textit{bhakti} as a \textit{Kshatriya} one, thus destabilizing Savithri’s rhetoric of a singular “Hindu” subjectivity. These differences are also further qualified according to historical and linguistic time: the “classical”, Sanskritic Brahmin metaphysician-\textit{guru} and the “medieval”, vernacular \textit{Kshatriya} devotee.

\textsuperscript{54} It is also worth reiterating that the \textit{Upanisads} are a foundational set of Sanskrit texts within both the pre-colonial Advaita Vedanta and modern Neo-Vedanta traditions.

\textsuperscript{55} John Stratton Hawley highlights the following as an example of Mirabai’s rebellion: “she refused to bow her head to her mother-in-law… and she refused to bow to the goddess who was the family’s chosen deity. To have done so, she felt, would have compromised her fealty to Krishna” (125).
This crisis of Savithri’s “Hindu” subjectivity is developed further in scenes that portray her singing the poems of Mirabai. There are at least three such scenes in the novel: when she meets Rama in France (137); when he puts the toe-rings on her feet during the gandharva ritual in London (215); and finally, when she visits him in the hospital during the Queen’s coronation (367). However, given the content of the poems that Savithri tends to sing, one might argue that her affiliation with Mirabai and bhakti in general is largely on the basis of vipralambha. As discussed in section 2.5, vipralambha is an aesthetic mode used for the depiction of love-in-separation. In Vijay Mishra’s discussion of Kabir and the Gitagovinda, he explains the dynamics of this aesthetic mode further: “When union (sambhoga) finally takes place, the reader wishes to return to the intentions of Radha’s vipralambha, to her feverish desire for union” (183). This temporal ordering of aesthetic modes is similarly invoked when Savithri is suddenly inspired to sing one of Mirabai’s poems just after having performed her arathi for Rama:

\[
\text{Sadhu matha ja... Sadhu matha ja...}\\
\text{O cenobite, O cenobite do not go.}\\
\text{Make a pyre for me, and when I burn,}\\
\text{Put the ashes on your brow,}\\
\text{O cenobite, do not go... (215)}
\]

There is a clever element of double-voicing in the poem that mirrors the crises of religion and Indianness which come to define the gandharva episode. The middle lines arguably demonstrate the use of the sambhoga (love in union) mode by presenting an image of the Beloved’s self-anointment, thus affirming the non-dualism of the Self that He and the devotee share during the moment of this act. However, the outer lines of the same poem express the fear of separation, to the point where the devotee’s plea is not only repeated but it encapsulates the non-dualism of the middle-lines, concealing its metaphysical resonances through a language of masochism in the opening and closing of the poem. This is not only vipralambha, but it is also dualist and thus generates a sense of ambivalence and instability that comes to characterize Savithri, Mirabai, and bhakti in general as markers of female, “Hindu” subjectivity. These qualities (especially dualism and masochism) echo Madeline’s characterization as well.
Thus, while both Rama and Savithri may wish to flirt with the mythological paradigms of a shared pre-colonial, “Hindu” and therefore “Indian” past, they obviously have different instincts for knowing and interpreting that episteme. Yet, the meeting point for both is in the phatic aspects of mythological rhetoric as they address one another as members of various divine couples: Shiva and Parvati, Krishna and Radha, etc. Again, the referents for this rhetoric prove to be quite different for each character. For Rama, Hindu myth affords a Neo-Vedantic reading of the Self: “And the Lord [Krishna] knows himself because Radha is, else he would have gone into penance and sat on Himalay” (214). Savithri, on the other hand, turns to myth for a vipralamba fantasy of romance and escape. In a letter written amidst the preparations for her wedding, she recounts the “medieval” history of Mughal invasions to North India and loses herself in the very telling of it. That her version of history is mythological, melodramatic and even Bollywood-esque should be obvious, and yet that too is part of its appeal as she identifies with her narrative of the abandoned, yet devoted, royal wives of the Rajput region:

‘When the Muslims came, Rama, shouting and leaping on horseback across the deserts, and vowing vengeance on the Rajput; when they encircled our fortresses, bribed Brahmin Ministers and tried to get in; when they cut off supplies of water and made us shout to the very skies with thirst; the men jumped on their horses and bid adieu to their wives, their daughters, the tilak of our blood on their foreheads; the gates were suddenly thrown open and the men charged the enemy, while the women read the Mahabharata and leapt into the flames inside. No Hindu woman would wed a Turk. I feel besieged – the Turk is at the door. Help me to jump into the pyre, Lord My Master, of this life and of all the lives to come. Help me.’ (295)

The “Turk” refers to Pratap, the unwanted husband now re-imagined as a would be foreigner, invader and even rapist, cast as so to project a chivalric fantasy of Rama as the hero, the god-like lover, and ironically, the native despite his diasporic predicament.

Madeline and Savithri may belong to very different cultures, but they bear strong resemblances in how they attempt to romance Rama through various dualistic modes of
love, desire, compassion and suffering. Savithri sees Rama as a god-like lover and draws on her memory of the Hindu past to evoke that relationship symbolically, but her approach is no less dualistic than Madeline’s. She satisfies Rama in his pursuit of the non-dualist Self, but he still remains the Other (however god-like) in her eyes. This shared sense of dualism also manifests itself in Savithri’s idea of being a “Hindu woman.” The term “Hindu” is to connote a bridge not unlike that which characterizes Madeline’s Orientalism, except here the idea of being “Hindu” is inscribed as a means of transcending regional north and south Indian differences as well as synthesizing both in contrast to the non-Indian Other. We have already discussed Savithri’s fascination with the south as the site of “civilization” in her first letter to Rama, and we have also seen Rama’s distaste for the north as a site of modernity. When Savithri arrives at his room to perform the gandharva, her appearance in a “South Indian sari” suggests an attempt to cross over and authenticate herself in cultural terms, but as her proliferated use of Mirabai suggests, she remains equally tied to the bhakti tradition that characterizes the north (in Rama’s eyes). While reflecting on the landscape of Dehra Dun in the Uttar Pradesh region, he develops this association further:

Mira the poetess is so northern. She, a Rajput could treat God, could treat Sri Krishna, her Kanhayya as she would Rathor. She could count the jewels of his howdah, admire the rings of his fingers, whisper that the cavalry move quicker and the drums beat as Royalty advances. And by pool and archway would the women await, with kunkum water and coco-nut [sic] and flower in hand, to welcome this great God, this Principle, this Presence amidst them. (45)

Rama’s concepts of “God” as “Principle” and “Presence” emphasizes the concept of nirguna brahman, whereas what we find in the bhakti of Mirabai is an emphasis on the saguna concept of God in a personal form. However, for Rama, this distinction carries both caste and geographic resonances, as the practice of saguna bhakti is ascribed exclusively to a north Indian space and regal Kshatriya subjectivity. The fact that south India boasts of its own legendary female bhakti poet-saints (i.e., Mahadeviyakka, the Kannada Virasaivite; Aandaal, the Tamil Alvar; and Janabai, the Marathi Varkari) with reputations for questioning Brahminical authority is a piece of history that Rama
conveniently ignores and arguably so for the sake of his own imagined geography, one which serves to map out various differences in caste (varna), metaphysics, bhakti poetics, and linguistic historicity (i.e., classical Sanskrit versus “medieval” vernacular) along the regional lines of north and south India.

To some extent, Rama’s treatment of Mirabai and bhakti in general represents a radical departure from Forster’s representation of Tukaram and the Gokul Ashtami in A Passage to India. For the latter, the festival’s invocations of Varkari culture are centripetally Sanskritized with impersonal, non-dualist, and Brahminical qualities. The trope of bhakti (“God is Love”) also produces a heterotopia of Indianness as a means of contesting History. In the case of The Serpent and the Rope, the bhakti that Savithri represents is dualist, personal, and historical. Ultimately, it fails Rama’s test of Indianness. However, this does not necessarily suggest that Rama is anti-bhakti, and he is certainly not anti-Buddhist either. He looks down on all such traditions, partly for their dualism, but he also tries to appreciate them for what they are while also evaluating the epistemological limits of these traditions as vehicles of Neo-Vedantic Truth and therefore Indianness. For Rama, the saguna bhakti of Mirabai is “civilized” enough to demonstrate a non-dualist awareness, as in the case of lines like “Let my ashes serve as a tilak on thy brow.” Yet, he also seems to view Mirabai’s poems as works of literature, not philosophy, and thus they are doubly characterized by ambiguity. This gives her poems an unstable quality, one that invites both dualist and non-dualist readings, but also that which positions religious practices such as bhakti as liminal in their relationship to absolute forms of Truth, Neo-Vedantic knowledge and the jnanam of Indianness in general. The next section will explore Rama’s position on the in-betweenness of Buddhism and how he signifies it as a problem of “poetic” deviancy. To explore this problem further, I will return to Rama’s final dialogue with Madeline. I will then look at how he resolves this problem of the poetic with Savithri: that is, by reconfiguring their platonic romance according to the paradigm of a guru-disciple relationship, the power dynamics of which are shared by all individual and civilizational symbols of Indianness in the novel.
3.3 “Poetic” Deviancy and Dharmic Discipline

In section 3.1, it was established that “India” was the root cause of Rama and Madeline’s marital crisis, and that Rama’s definition of “India” was grounded within a Neo-Vedantic discourse of civilizational essentialism, non-dualist metaphysics, and varnic subjectivity. Although Rama’s tone is undeniably Indo-centric (though not along ethnic or racial lines), the last half of his final extended dialogue with Madeline suddenly reveals a liberal perspective on the relative legitimacy of Marxism and historical-materialism as the basis of a future modern civilization. This move echoes a similar bipolar engagement with socialism in the Neo-Vedantic writings of Gandhi, Vivekananda, and Coomaraswamy, as briefly discussed in section 1.4. In the case of The Serpent and the Rope, it also brings to fore a reconsideration of the novel’s civilizational allegory. Given Rama and Madeline’s marital crisis, one might easily read the novel as a meditation on a larger conflict between East and West. However, as Rama explains, the conflict, for which his marriage serves as a symbol, is much more complex:

‘There can only be two attitudes to life. Either you believe the world exists and so – you. Or you believe that you exist – and so the world. There is no compromise possible. And the history of philosophy… is nothing but a search for a clue to this problem: ‘If I am real, then the world is me.’ It also means that you are not what you think and feel you are, that is, a person. But if the world is real, then you are real in terms of objects, and that is a tenable position. The first is the Vedantin’s position – the second is the Marxist’s – and they are irreconcilable.’

‘And in between the two?’

‘And in between are the many poetic systems: monism, tempered monism, non-dualistic modified dualism, God and Paradise, Islam, etc. etc….’

56 In fact, the preface to most editions of the novel invites the reader to interpret the marriage according to a civilizational style: “Here the full implications of the meeting of East and West are described on the intimate plane by Rama, a young Indian, and his story moves through India, France and England at the time of the Queen’s coronation. Madeline, his French wife, seeks an answer to her problems, which ultimately finds in a personal equation of Catholicism and Buddhism; for Rama a solution is not so easy, but eventually he realizes that he must take the final leap into reality, and search for a Teacher, his Guru” (1). Although the preface is not credited to Rao, a personal email correspondence with John R. Murray of John Murray Publishers confirms that Rao “would certainly have had some hand in these paragraphs.”
'Where does Buddhism come into your system then?'
'The supreme religion of a poet.' (337-38)

The poetic dimension of Buddhism characterizes it as a religion as well as an episteme that stands in liminality to the civilizational ethos of both Neo-Vedantic Indianess and Marxist historical-materialism. In short, it represents a form of civilizational in-betweenness and the same is true for the representation of Savithri’s approach to saguna bhakti. As in the case of Forster, Rama’s rhetoric of liminality and in-betweenness stands doubly in contrast to its radical significance as a key concept of postcolonial theory (particularly in the work of Homi Bhabha). \(^57\) Rather than being celebrated as a site of anti-colonial or post-nationalist resistance, the poetic is conceptualized by Rama as the rhetoric for a form of deviancy. The latter is a constituted as such to highlight a problem that goes deeper than the metaphysical one of dualism and at the end of the dialogue, Rama reiterates his position on in-betweenness with a Vedantic proverb that explains the significance of the novel’s title: “The world is either unreal or real – the serpent or the rope. There is no in-between-the-two – and all that is in-between is poetry.” (340)

For Rama, Marxism is equal to Neo-Vedanta in its legitimacy to serve as the philosophical basis of a future modern civilization. Both are equally capable of guiding humanity towards a realization of absolute Truth. The concept of the latter is different for each, but it is nevertheless recognized as a form of absolute knowledge. According to Rama, every individual (and especially Madeline) has to “choose” a mode of living that affirms the sovereignty of one absolute in order to fulfill the needs of “civilization”. For Western philosophy, this is arguably a matter of ethics, and for Neo-Vedanta, it is one of dharma. In either case, the emphasis of Rama’s argument is on centripetality – the discursive pull of an absolute Truth – and the impersonal ethos that places the impersonal needs of civilization before those of the individual self. As argued in section 1.3,

\(^{57}\) It is also interesting that Rama characterizes Islam as a poetic religion, thus marking it as occupying a position of placelessness within his bipolar geography of imagined civilizations. This too echoes the in-betweenness of Aziz in A Passage to India, who is coincidentally also a Muslim character.
centripetal dynamics and impersonal modes are key tropes in Indutva narratives. However, in Rao’s novel, this tropology is modified slightly as a means of measuring the “civility” of any society or philosophical tradition – albeit by Neo-Vedantic standards. It is also worth remembering that the term Sanskriti is often translated into English as “civilization”. Thus, in Rama’s discourse, the act of subjecting or submitting oneself to the centripetality and impersonality of Truth, regardless of the form, arguably constitutes an act of Sanskritization – that is, an act of becoming “civilized.”

One can see how the failure to orient oneself centripetally or adopt an impersonal mode of being can signify a form of deviancy, unethical responsibility or adharmic fulfillment within Rama’s worldview. The big question is why he chooses to define this concept of deviancy through the rhetoric of the “poetic”. Esha Dey has interpreted the latter as a synonym for “heresy”, which holds well given the early history of Buddhism’s reception by Vedic Hindus as a sramanic or heterodox religion (81). Yet, as mentioned earlier, while Rama is arguably aggressive in his metaphysical evaluations, he is not an anti-Buddhist Vedantin, and much of this distinction can be revealed through his rhetoric of the “poetic”.

For me, the rhetoric of the “poetic” suggests that Rama’s problem with Buddhism (and especially Madeline’s self-designed practice) is as literary and epistemological as it is religious and metaphysical. I argue this on the basis of Viktor Shkolovsky’s concept of poetry (and art in general) as an act of defamiliarization. According to the latter,

> The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar”, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process or perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged (12).

In poetry or verbal art, one method of defamiliarization involves the subversive presentation of words so that a semiotic distance emerges between the signifier and its referent. As a result, poetic language comes to function centrifugally as a veil to the objective or absolute Truth of the object at hand, making it difficult to be perceived and more importantly, known.
Obviously, not all poetry has the same function or effect on its readers, but it is interesting that poetry plays a great role in the characterization of both Madeline and Savithri as deviant subjects. We have already seen this in the previous section with the appeal that Mirabai (and especially her vipralambha poems) holds for Savithri. In the case of Madeline, Rama draws attention to a similar appeal in Buddhist discourse: “She is moved by Buddhist compassion and poetry. It has, as she said, Christian humility without stupidity and blind belief; it has poetry without the smell of the crypt” (81). What Madeline is said to abhor in Christianity – “stupidity and blind belief” – is arguably its epistemological dimension. Thus, by focusing on the poetic dimension, Madeline’s Buddhist practice comes to represent a defamiliarization of, and therefore a deviation from, an absolute form of Truth.

Her poetic sensibility also extends to Buddhism’s non-verbal aspects. Towards the end of the novel, one of the last images Rama offers is of the home Madeline has redesigned according to the style of a Buddhist monastery: “The rooms were bare… There were many chakras and mandalas on them, like one sees on Tibetan Tanakas. The table was richer with a few more vajras, a few more demons, and a very beautiful big Avalokiteshwara” (392). A conventional postcolonial approach to this image might be to read Madeline as a European woman “gone native” in her attempt to radically imitate the ways of the Oriental Other. Rama might not entirely disagree, but he appears to go one step further by suggesting her notions of “native” and “Oriental” are also selective to evoke that which is ornamental, aesthetically beautiful, exotic, and therefore “poetic”. The same is arguably true for Savithri’s attempt to “go south” with her use of a sari, censor, vermilion, and camphor in the gandharva episode. In both cases, there is a

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58 Sharrad is also the only critic to make this connection between the two female characters: “[Savithri], like Madeline, is human and partly represents the ‘poetic’ paradisal world of Brindavan that Rama’s asceticism and jnana philosophy will not permit him to accept” (113). It is also worth remembering that poetry plays a similarly integral role in Forster’s characterization of Aziz, not to mention his Sufi-inspired poem on “the Friend”. The latter can be read ambiguously as an expression of personal love or a metaphor for an impersonal God, thus highlighting an instability that mirrors the Mirabai poem cited in The Serpent and the Rope.
fetishization of ornament-as-signifier and blindness to both the centripetality of the referent and its larger epistemological relationship to an absolute Truth.

Thus, in Rama’s relationship with Madeline, the central conflict is imagined as neither racial-colonial nor ethno-cultural. It is not restricted to the cultural politics of East and West, north and south India, Hinduism and Buddhism, etc. Although there is the metaphysical conflict of dualism and non-dualism, the greater one highlighted above is that of absolute Truth and the “poetic”, of fixity and liminality, and as we will see below, discipline and deviancy.

Having said that, when it comes to the larger idea of Indianness, a competition with Marxism, historical-materialism, Hegelian progress, and Western modernity is nevertheless vital to Rama’s Indutva narrative. He concedes that both Marxism and Neo-Vedanta share a common level of philosophical, ethical, and dharmic legitimacy; their divergence is with regards to how each tradition deals with the problem of the “poetic”. For Marxism, Rama imagines a rationalist refusal to admit any form of deviancy: “‘[t]he new civilization has to be a technocratic one. It will have to banish the personal, the romantic, the poetic from life…’” (337). For the sake of contrast, he idealizes India’s trans-historical civilization as one that allows for some degree of accommodation and hospitality. As seen in the case of Mirabai, the appeal of poetry lies in its interpretative ambiguity as well as its metaphysical ambivalence; it veils the Truth, but it also has the potential to reveal it through other forms of defamiliarization. For Rama, this coheres well with the Neo-Vedantic conception of Truth as a non-dualistic reality. As he explains to Madeline, “The true poet sees poetry as poet, and the world as “I”” (339). From Rama’s perspective, a centripetal orientation to this Truth is the only way that a “poetic” religion like Buddhism has historically ever had a chance of becoming “Indian” and thus, by undergoing a form of Sanskritization. Rama explains this to Madeline through general references to the history of Buddhism on the subcontinent: “‘It tries to take more and more of Vedanta into it, so that Buddha becomes a Hindu Avatara and the Mahayana
almost a Vedantic system – but a negative one, that is all. What is Indian remains’” (339).\(^{59}\)

Thus, all religions and cultures are welcome to settle and participate in the civilization-Sanskritization of subcontinental India but solely on the condition of their centripetal orientation with Vedantic tradition.\(^{60}\) If any such group chooses not to orient themselves, Rama prescribes two options based on history and religious practice. On one hand, the group is forced into exile, as is the case of Buddhism: “‘The Buddhists say the world, the perception is real, ‘Sarvan-Kshanikum’, that everything is minutous the moment we see it. The Vedantin says the perception is real, yes; but that difference is big enough to drive the Buddhism of Gautama outside our frontiers’” (339). Rama is vague on whether or not this act of exile is voluntary or brought about by violent persecution and this is partly because he places a stronger emphasis on the second option whereby the “poetic” is subjected to the logic of varna: that is, the y-axis of ritual status, of purity and pollution. This is illustrated when Madeline asks Rama to explain “what happens when it” – that is, Buddhism – “comes” back into India after having been driven out (339). He replies, “It will be treated as a separate caste, and maybe given a compassionate bath, when the wound is painful, at the feet.” (339). As a “poetic” stranger (and let us not forget that “estrangement” is a synonym for Shklovsky’s concept of defamiliarization), Buddhism is not necessarily received as a Shudra or a Dalit, but rather as an avarnic guest. By touching (“bathing”) the guest’s feet, a Neo-Vedantic ritual of anointment is fulfilled, revealing the Self in the body of the Other and in ways that potentially recall the way that Aziz and his family are offered “small courtesies and presents“ in the Gokul Ashtami episode of *A Passage to India*. By receiving them as guests, the ritual participants of the festival affirm the sovereignty of the Circle, its varnic order as well as its brahman-ical

\(^{59}\) This echoes the philosophy of Indian hospitality that Godbole enunciates in his rhetoric of “Come, come, come…”, his invitation to both Aziz and Fielding to enter the Circle of India’s ritual culture and find their centripetal place within its varnic rings.

\(^{60}\) The latter is idealized as India’s trans-historical essence, but it nevertheless bears stronger resemblances to the modern discourse of Neo-Vedanta, as distinguished by Richard King in Chapter One.
oneness. As affirmed in the popular Hindu proverb, the “guest is God”. Yet, in the case of Rama’s worldview, so long as Buddhism remains centrifugally “poetic”, it will never find a home in his imagined “India.” Ritual customs enable an exaltation of the guest as God – that is, as a means to Neo-Vedantic Truth – but they do not enable a transcendence of the guest’s subjectivity as “poetic”, liminal, and deviant to all civilizations.

As Rama and Madeline’s dialogue comes to a close, it is clear that Madeline has no interest in orienting herself to the Indianness of Rama’s inter-civilizational worldview. She tells him, “‘leave me to my poetic world’” (340). This single utterance represents both a rejection of Rama’s discourse as well as reclamation of her own worldview and ethos. It is also her most assertive moment in the entire novel and thus doubly serves to characterize the “poetic” as a site of resistance on the grounds of gender as well as metaphysics and caste. After all, in Rama’s eyes, Madeline has come to represent a member of another caste, one that is not only low but deviant and placeless; he goes on to affirm this representation by washing her feet in the next scene. However, for Madeline, this sense of varnic difference represents a matter of ethno-cultural differences. She tells him, ““Find then, my friend, an Indian Maitreyi”” (341). One would think that the finality of this exchange should leave Rama free to pursue Savithri, but it is already evident that she will never be his Maitreyi either. Nevertheless, Savithri does become Rama’s disciple and it is on these pedagogical grounds that Savithri is portrayed as a woman who is closer than Madeline in reaching Rama’s ideal of “Indian” femininity.

Savithri’s makes her turn to discipleship through the course of her final meetings with Rama in London. She comes to visit Rama when he is hospitalized for treatment of a lung disease that has ailed him throughout the course of his marital crisis. At this point in the

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61 Citing the Vedantin Swami Sambuddhananda, Arvind Sharma explains this proverb in his introductory discussion of karma yoga: ““Now in India a guest is a sacred person, almost God for the time being, and must be treated as such”” (2000 130). Pratima Bowes traces its literary analogues to the Vishnu Purana, where the description of rituals bears an uncanny resemblance to Rama’s hypothetical description: ““if a guest comes he must be received with all hospitality, he must be offered a seat, his feet are to be washed, food must be respectfully given to him, he must be spoken to with all kindness and civility”” (295). Bowes also highlights the relevance of caste (albeit as jati) to this ritual context: ““The householder should pay attention to that guest who comes from another place and whose lineage is not known”” (my italics 295).
novel, Savithri has officially married Pratap, but she is clearly disinterested in him. Knowing that she cannot have Rama either, she becomes melancholic and contemplates the purpose of life. Below is a selection of her lines from the first of their two dialogues:

‘Woman should not be’
‘Woman is coeval with death.’
‘Woman is the meaning of death.’
‘You said: The woman is the world. The truth of the world is dissolution. Or rather Truth can only be because death is. If the world were the world, there would be no Truth.’ (364-65)

Savithri’s attraction to death echoes Madeline’s turn to Buddhist asceticism and in both cases, the denial of both life and the body is out of line with Rama’s feminine ideal and largely so because it represents a masculine trait. He argues, “Man rejoices in his own death. For man, death is transcendence” – that is, the transcendence of death through the realized knowledge of deathlessness (366). Thus, Savithri’s contemplation of death is unwomanly and therefore deviant, albeit for reasons that are slightly different from those prescribed to Madeline above. Yet, in both cases, it is women who are deemed deviant by a male character, and these judgments are also similarly expressed through the mode of a dialogue. The latter is also a theatrical mode where Rama performs the role of a guru, delivering an oral transmission of knowledge to which the female character is the receiver and potential disciple. In both cases, the female, would-be disciple raises questions for the sake of clarification and demonstrates a sense of agency in her decision to agree or disagree, but she is otherwise portrayed as being incapable of achieving victory in these dialogues.62 Rama’s responses, on the other hand, are a blend of the cryptic and the philosophical. They might be described as having a “poetic” quality but they are also “Truthful” to the extent that they intend to lead their listener towards a self-realized point of centripetality and Neo-Vedantic affirmation.

62 It is interesting that Naik reads Savithri as the guru-like figure: “Saivthri… becomes a Guru to him, before he sets out to seek his Guru proper in the end” (90). This is consistent with other readings of Savithri’s ideal femininity and her presence as a vehicle for the revelation of Truth. Bhalla, on other hand, is no feminist, but he reads Rao’s concept of the guru in Serpent as wholly masculine: “The concept of the personal Guru signifies the rebirth of the paternal principle” (103).
As with Madeline, Rama meets this objective by offering Savithri a pair of choices. However, this time, the options are presented in a language of symbols and images, rather than metaphysics and civilizational discourse. This final dialogue begins with Rama:

‘The plane must accept the direction of the radar, that there be no accident. Either you are a plane and you follow national and international conventions – or you do not fly.’

‘And no garland put on your wings, and no coco-nut broken as you make your first flight?’

‘Yes, that is what I mean.’

‘So when the plane refuses the radar, and only loves the beauty of the broad sky, the sea below and sands of Santa Cruz shining in the sun…’

‘Then it must crash.’

‘So the plane must obey the radar?’

‘Yes, that is dharma. The law is dharma…’ (368-69)

The first two of Savithri’s responses reflect her desire to adhere to the “poetic” dimensions of religion as signified in the artifice of ritual ornaments (garlands and coconuts); the sensual appreciation of the sky, sea, and sand; and the beauty of nature purely for the sake of aesthetic pleasure. For Rama, none of this demonstrates any sense of ethical responsibility. Thus, they remain forms of deviancy and in-betweenness, unless completed by an orientation to the dharmic radar. To land or not to land, to be or not to be, to be a good wife or to not marry at all: these are Savithri’s choices. In the end, her resolution is a combination of both and in a manner that is arguably non-dualistic. She writes to Rama after he has left the hospital and returned to France: “‘The radar, Rama, has landed the plane where it should. Forgive me. S.’” (390). As per Rama’s advice, Savithri becomes the good wife but also a woman that been fixed to her wifely dharma. The plane may fly and it has landed, but it is neither in-between nor placeless; its “poetic” aspects have been disciplined.

Savithri soon returns to India and Rama celebrates her transformation by announcing to himself in private, “‘Yes, the queen has been crowned, the Queen.” (369). This remark establishes a conceit with the background narrative of Queen Elizabeth II’s
coronation, signifying the latter event as an allegory for Savithri’s transformation – an observation that other critics have made as well. This remark also signifies a gesture of masculinity, Brahminical subjectivity, and guru power. As we will see in the next two sections, this gesture doubly enables a varnic allegory of global Indianness through Rama’s interactions with the following individuals: Savithri’s fiancée Pratap; his sisters in north India and Bombay; and Madeline’s cousin Catherine, who ultimately represents Rama’s feminine ideal. Through these interactions, Rama also enunciates his critique of India’s postcolonial modernity, thus enabling a vision of de-territorialized Indianness – the recovery of Indianness in spaces outside of India.

3.4 Nehruvian India and the Amnesia of Indianness

Earlier on in the hospital scene, when Savithri expresses her disinterest in Pratap, Rama’s response is to demand that she recognize her wifely duty and therefore her dharma. At the same time, he claims his possession over Savithri: “Don’t say, “that man, my husband.” He is your husband, and you are mine’” (367). This utterance partly serves as a reminder of the promise Savithri made on the night of their gandharva marriage – “I’ll come when you don’t need me, when you can live without me” – a vow of spiritual and therefore eternal commitment. Rama employs the same language in the hospital, but the effect is neither romantic nor devotional; it is not even “poetic”. Rather, his claim – “you are mine” – conveys a desire to possess Savithri in the impersonal manner of a guru to a disciple, offering love through platonic forms of counsel, wisdom, knowledge, and Truth. His advice on being a good wife (to Pratap) reveals a patriarchal interpretation of duty-as-dharma, but it also registers at the level of caste when the accompanying rhetoric of Savithri’s queenship is interpreted as a reference to the duties of a Kshatriya wife. Savithri demonstrates her acceptance of this dharma at the very end of their final dialogue: “She touched me with the tip of her lips as though Truth had been there, just there, and the moment was the whole of Truth” (369). The idea of this being a ‘moment’ and therefore inscribed with the temporality of a muhurat gives this act of mutual touch a ritualistic dimension, but there is a difference between the touches performed here and those in the gandharva episode. The basis of contact in the former was through
ornaments, ritual objects, and mythological rhetoric – all of which are used in a poetic manner. However, in the case of Savithri’s kiss, it represents a *mutual* act of anointment. There is room to read the kiss as a recognition of the Self in the Other, but Rama’s rhetoric of queenship (“Yes, the queen has been crowned, the Queen”) also generates a *varnic* supplement to this Vedantic reading. His words have the translational power of anointing Savithri as a *Kshatriya* woman and her kiss subsequently enunciates a parallel recognition of his subjectivity as a Brahmin male and more importantly, a figure of pedagogical authority in the form of a *guru*. Rama and Savithri’s *varnic* union is also inscribed with geographic significance as it comes to serve as a symbol of the ideal relationship between north and south India. Of course, the relationship is clearly assymetrical in terms of caste, region and gender (i.e., the *Kshatriya* as north Indian as well as feminine). It also has a temporal aspect that is unique to the novel: the *Kshatriya* north as modern and therefore a subject of History; and the Brahminical south as traditional and therefore trans-historical. This allegory of union across personal, regional, and temporal lines is integral to Rama’s vision of Indianness, and yet that vision as such would not be possible were it not for Rama’s critique of modern India. Up to now, we have discussed this critique through a discussion of Savithri’s depiction, but I want to now explore it further by looking at her fiancée, Pratap.

Pratap has a marginal presence in the novel; we never really see him and the only time he speaks is through a letter to Rama, requesting his assistance in persuading Savithri to go forth with their arranged marriage (108-09). By approaching Rama in the manner of a disciple seeking advice from a *guru*, Pratap unknowingly initiates Rama and Savithri’s platonic affair, thus triggering off the events of their *gandharva* marriage as well as the moment of *varnic* union in the hospital. His presence serves to complicate the plot with a second love triangle, but his ultimate significance is as a metaphor for modern Indian nationalism and a metonym for the Nehruvian project of postcolonial modernity.

Like Savithri, Pratap comes from an aristocratic background. He belongs to a family of landowners – “Jagirdars of Mukhtapuri in Aurangabad District” – with a history of privileged status under British colonial rule (30). However, the family is also regarded as somewhat “impoverished” when compared to others of their community and standing:
“they only owned some six or seven villages now” (30). Pratap deals with this social stigma by seeking a path of upward mobility in the colonial administration. His academic career takes him to England for training in the Indian Civil Service and he eventually lands a position that grants him political clout above the rulers of India’s princely states, among which Savithri’s father is one. Rama reflects on the nature of Pratap’s social privilege: “After all to be in the Political Services was to belong to the most exclusive cadres of the Government of India: you were not quite an Englishman or a Maharaja, because you played polo. You ruled Maharajas, who ruled Indians, and the British received you at the Club…” (31). Pratap does not enjoy the same level of elite status after India wins its independence, but he nevertheless remains a privileged figure in the new nation’s bureaucracy. While the details of his position are scant, it nevertheless generates a counterpoint between the Nehruvian idea of modern, postcolonial India and Rama’s ideal of Neo-Vedantic, civilizational Indianess.

In one instance, the counterpoint of India and Indianness is enunciated through a letter from Savithri, describing her life as a newlywed in Pratap’s home:

‘...I hold receptions, and our young and new republic is growing strong. Ministers, Secretaries of State, come and go, and I think, what is this India we are building? Oh, Rama, it makes me sad, sad! Some want it to become like our neighbour China, and others like their foster-mother white England. And nobody wants India to be India.’ (345)

The letter raises issues that echo the critiques of numerous postcolonial novelists and theorists: i.e., the pressures on newly independent societies to imitate Western modes of nationalism, capitalism, communism, industrialism, etc., and therefore reproduce the history of colonial subservience. Yet, the challenge for “India to be India” is also closely related to Neo-Vedanta and its vision of grounding modern India in the culture, religion, philosophy, and Spirit of Indianess. A centripetal relationship between the political modernity of Nehruvian India and the religious modernity of Neo-Vedanta would thus distinguish India as a “civilization”, rather than merely a modern nation-state.
Towards the end of the novel, Rama reiterates this Indutva dream while imagining Savithri’s experiences of returning to her father’s home and the extent to which its courtly atmosphere has been transformed by India’s postcolonial modernity:

I wondered what it would be like for Savithri to go back to the Surajpur Palace, with the Nine Musics of the day, the gunfire for the birthday of the Maharaja – he had a right to five rounds – and the parties at night, where the new crude Congressmen and the old vulgar aristocracy mingled for the building of a magnificent India. But it would never be Savithri’s India. It would in fact be nobody’s India, till someone sat and remembered what India was. (my italics 380)

Thus, while The Serpent and the Rope deals with Rama’s marriage as the site of his own individual loss of Indianness, these reflections ascribe that loss to the larger collective body of the nation. In the passage above, the loss of Indianness is doubly articulated as a form of amnesia – a loss of memory. This connotation is important because it reminds us that, for Rama, Indianness is essentially an idea (jnanam). In fact, Rama is explicit in making this acknowledgement: “India is not a country like France is, or like England; India is an idea, a metaphysic” (380). To elaborate, Indianness – the essence of “India” – is an abstraction, one that can serve as the basis of a “civilization”, but not the other way around. The origins of Indianness are abstract and loosely tethered to the geographic territory of subcontinental India. Yet, the amnesia of Indianness characterizes the “new crude Congressmen” as a party of postcolonial philistines whose government has succeeded in exiling Rama’s Indutva ideal from the political geography of modern India – a reversal of the Buddhist predicament. This sense of amnesia obviously renders the political project of Nehruvian nationalism as deviant and perhaps even “poetic”, but it also raises an important question over the fate of Indianness as an idea imagined in the novel.

Just as there is a tragicomic recovery of Indianness in Rama’s personal relationships with Savithri and Madeline, there is a similar aspect to the narrative of loss, amnesia, and exile in the novel’s global framework: the events of civilizational loss on the subcontinent inevitably lead to the recovery of Indianness in the post-imperial West. These acts of
recovery as well as memory are tied to two key events in the novel: Rama’s decision to return to India and the Queen’s Coronation in London.

Rama declares his decision to return to the subcontinent just after his divorce has been made official. However, the decision is made not in response to the divorce so much as an epiphany of his would-be guru. He recalls the experience in his journal:

5.4.54. No, not a God but a Guru is what I need. ‘Oh Lord, My Guru, My Lord,” I cried, in the middle of this dreadful winter night. It was last night; the winds had arisen, the trees of Luxembourg were crying till you could hear them like the triple oceans of the Goddess at Cape Comorin. “Lord, Lord My Guru, come to me, tell me; give me thy touch, vouchsafe,” I cried, “the vision of Truth, my Lord.” (408)

A paragraph later, Rama reconstructs this epiphany in the form of a visionary experience. In his mind, he meets the guru in the guise of a boatman along the banks of the Ganges river. The guru is unnamed character and a stranger to Rama’s personal universe, but he speaks and takes his would-be disciple down the river: “I went, and man, I tell you, my brother, my friend, I will not return. I have gone whence there is no returning” (408). Shortly after, Rama reveals to us that the location of this mystical point of no return is “Travancore”, incidentally the south Indian home of Rao’s own guru, Sri Atmananda.

The revealed location of Travancore marks a point of convergence between Rama’s fictional autobiography and Rao’s own personal history, and one that continues to deepen in light of Rao’s marital history: his discovery of Sri Atmananda coincided with the dissolution of his first marriage, which was similarly an inter-cultural affair. It is tempting to try and read the novel as a means of gaining a better understanding of Rao’s mind, just as some scholars have tried to understand Forster’s Indian experiences by seeking the analogues between A Passage to India, The Hill of Devi, and his various essays on India. As with Forster, my interest in Rao has less to do with his own personal history than his intellectual background, much of which is dominated by Neo-Vedanta and clearly integrated into the worldview of his protagonist. In the episode of the guru’s revelation, the Neo-Vedanta tradition is arguably invoked through the reference to Cape
Comorin, a site located at the southern-most tip of the subcontinent and later renamed Kanyakumari. Historically, the legend of this site is that this is where Vivekananda sat in meditation before receiving a vision of his life’s mission. Shortly after, he traveled to the United States, delivered his famous address at the 1893 Parliament of World Religions in Chicago and consequently developed a dual-reputation as both Hinduism’s ambassador to the West and the founder of Neo-Vedantic revivalism in India. When Rama experiences his epiphany amidst the setting of Luxembourg, the reference to Cape Comorin has the effect of defamiliarizing his exilic, European surroundings with a setting that evokes a vague, yet immediate sense of Indianness through this sthalapuranic comparison. It also initiates a geographic reversal of the Vivekananda legend as Rama plans to leave the West and reorient himself in the directions of both the East and the south.

Yet, what remains so unique (and often overlooked by critics) in The Serpent and the Rope is that despite its detailed narrative of at least two cross-continental migrations, the journey to Travancore is never realized within the novel. There is no depiction of a homecoming for the novel’s exilic hero. Of course, one can safely assume that Rama will eventually return “there”; the problem is that the reader will never know what happens “there” or what that place looks like. This may be in keeping with the

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63 A sthalapurana is the “legendary history” of a particular site; this is the definition that Rao gives us in the “Author’s Foreword” to Kanthapura (vii). The latter novel, he suggests, is a modern sthalapurana of the village for which it is eponymously named, and the village is legendary because of its connection between Gandhian history. Similarly, Cape Comorin or Kanyakumari is renowned as the sthalapurana of Vivekananda’s meditations on its southernmost rocks.

64 Dey’s reading is the rare case where this fact is explicitly pointed out, but on the grounds that it marks a difference between Christian and Hindu concepts of home: “For a Christian, “home” can never be him “himself,” it is only in the love of his personal God that the individual occupies fundamentally a different level. For a Hindu Vedantin, on the other hand, realization is not a coming “home,” but the recognition of the non-difference between himself and the Absolute” (135). This Vedantic variation on Salman Rushdie’s “imaginary homelands” is reiterated in Naik’s view of Travancore as being “essentially a holy spot in the landscape of spiritual consciousness” (1987 169). It is also echoed by Bhalla: “Travancore is the new capital in the symbolic and psychic geography of Rama’s self” (105).

65 Unnikrishnan refers to an interview where Rao encourages this reading: “The Serpent and the Rope is a novel of the discovery of the guru. The Cat and Shakespeare shows how one functions after one has found the guru – the Vedantic Guru” (142). The latter is much more esoteric than The Serpent and the Rope, and its plot is indeed largely centered around the guru-disciple relationship of its two main characters, Govindan Nair and Ramakrishna Pai. However, the fact remains that this is an entirely different fictional universe, and one that is set before independence, not to mention well before the dating of the Queen’s
characterization of Travancore as a point of no return, a heterotopia so singular and sublime that it eludes the signifying powers of language. Yet, what is perhaps more important is the paradox that while Rama intends to leave Europe permanently for India, he seems to tell the remainder of his story from the perspective of someone who has already returned from his discipleship before having even left. In other words, he ends the novel as someone who has achieved the status of a guru to his peers. This paradox is quietly dramatized during a small party at the home of Catherine and Georges in Paris.

Catherine is Madeline’s cousin and despite the divorce, Rama remains close to her and her family. In fact, they are the closest thing he has to both family and community; his bond with them is also stronger than those that hold him to any of his relatives in India. The relationship with Catherine and her family thus constitutes a form of “re-familiarization” – the opposite of Shklovsky’s poetic defamiliarization, but also a process of recovering a sense of family and therefore home. In order to make sense of this process, let us first take a closer look at his estrangement from the family in India.

As with Pratap, Rama’s stepmother and sisters are characterized symbolically as metonyms for different aspects of Nehruvian India. He says,

\[\text{I was not in a hurry to go back to India: what was there to go back to, after all? Little Mother had gone to live with Saroja in Allahabad, where Subramanya had been transferred. She was so happy, for she could take her bath every morning at the Ganges. Sukumari and her husband were both in Bombay. Sukumari had joined the Communist Party. (373)}\]

There is ambivalence in Rama’s attitude, a combination of alienation and peaceful detachment. He appears to be comfortable in knowing that his stepmother will no longer be dependent on him and that he is increasingly being relieved of his domestic

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1953 coronation. Furthermore, as Naik points out, both Travancore and the guru-disciple paradigm continues to be referenced in Rao’s other works, including the short story “The Policeman and the Rose”, so there is no real reason to fix a sense of textual continuity between Serpent and Cat (Naik 1987 173).
responsibilities in all aspects of life in India just as in France following his divorce from Madeline. This signifies a release from what both classical Hindu and modern Neo-Vedantic philosophy define as the *garhastya ashrama*, the “householder stage” of life, clearing the space for Rama’s subsequent shift to the path of discipleship and meditation under his future guru.\(^{66}\)

There is also an obvious sense of disenchantment with the choices the family has made, registering at the symbolic levels of both ideology and imagined geography. Everyone has moved on and their changes are registered through their migrations to the north (Allahabad and Bombay), migrations that are equally significant as *varnic* displacements in Rama’s worldview. As a northern city, Allahabad is doubly inscribed with a *Kshatriya* sensibility as well as the ethos of Nehruvian modernity, the project of nation-building in which Rama’s brother-in-law is equally a participant – the family would not have moved there otherwise. Moving up to the north is thus presented as an act of spiritual descent, the *varnic* aspects of which are further developed in Sukumari’s shift to Bombay.

In earlier sections of the novel, Rama visits the city on at least two separate occasions, and in all such instances his attitude is one of disgust and negation. There is the minor episode where he indulges a fortnight-long affair with Lakshmi, the neglected wife of his friend, Captain Sham Sunder; the latter is himself unfaithful to his wife and seems to encourage the affair. Rama acknowledges the sexual and sensual gratifications of the affair: “My days and nights would be spent in luxurious enjoyment” (299). However, the experience is ironic as the excess of pleasures generate a loss of both identity and *dharma* in the sense of familial duties: “Often lying by [Lakshmi] I wondered whether I was Rama, Saroja’s loved brother, Little Mother’s stepson?” (299). This experience of amnesia and what Samkhya philosophy might regard as a state of darkness or *tamas* marks the anti-climax of Rama’s trip to India. With a tone of resignation and

\(^{66}\) While this release from the householder stage concurs with the classical concept of life’s four stages (*varnasrama*), Rama’s desire for discipleship does not necessarily signify a shift to either of the remaining stages, the forest-dweller (*vanaprasthya*) or renunciant (*sannyasa*); he ends the novel performing neither.
disenchantment, he tells us, “[m]y Indian pilgrimage was ended” and it becomes evident that modern India is devoid of Indianness (300).

It is worth remembering that Lakshmi is also the name for the mythological Hindu goddess of wealth. This coheres with Rama’s initial impressions of Bombay as a commercial centre with a materialistic sense of culture: “Alas, nobody landed in Bombay but merchants” (47). However, this impression goes beyond a critique of capitalism. For Rama, it also affirms his own sense of caste duty and authority: “this barbaric city simply had no meaning for a Brahmin like me. It spoke a language so alien, had a structure so improper, made a demand so vehement and secondary, that no one had business there” (46). Bombay is thus characterized as a deviant city, a place devoid of higher purpose or ethics, because it is under the hegemony of those belonging to those in charge of business – that is, the Vaishya of postcolonial India. Yet, this impression also has the effect of producing an allegorical, varnic geography of modern India: the south is the home of pure Brahminical tradition; the north is the modern, yet amnesiac, Nehruvian Kshatriya; and Bombay is the deviant Vaishya metropolis.

The novel then envisions a secondary dimension to Bombay, where the city’s capitalist atmosphere is also the space of Rama’s sister’s communist ambitions. Though Sukumari’s status as a comrade in the Communist Party of India is the last detail we hear of her in the novel, her fascination with Marxism in fact goes back to the very first moment she is introduced to the novel. In a brief exchange with Rama, she explains her position: “‘The poverty of our Motherland could only be eradicated with the abolition of every form of caste and distinction. I have read some Marx. But you, brother, who know so much about all this, tell me what to read’” (92). Rama’s response is one of bafflement

67 Naik notes this aspect of Bombay’s character: “He finds Bombay a ‘barbaric city’ and declares that it “had no right to exist,” because it is predominantly a mercantile centre” (1987 168). That this gives the city a caste identity is not mentioned, but it is certainly suggested in this reference to merchant life.

68 As discussed in section 1.4, Vivekananda’s essay on “Modern India” offers a similar allegorical engagement with the history of Indian civilization by inscribing each epoch with the qualities of varnic subjectivity. The age of colonialism, with its ethos of “rank materialism, plenitude of fortune, accumulation of gigantic power, and intense sense-pursuits”, is thus re-imagined as the age of Vaishya hegemony and in ways that are echoed by Rama in his allegorical treatment of Bombay (476).
as he finds himself at a loss as to how he should respond: “It was strange for me to think that my sister was reading Karl Marx.” (92). The strangeness that Rama refers to here is due to his dilemma of occupying a patriarchal position as an elder brother but also as a potential guru-like figure to his sister and the family in general. This is furthered by the fact that he has been requested to guide her on a topic that, as we have already seen in the dialogue with Madeline, he is willing to respect as the basis of a legitimate form of civilization, but not to the extent of compromising his belief in Indianness. Interestingly, for Sukumari, the appeal of communism is in its power to abolish caste, thus echoing Vivekananda’s revisionist view of classless, and therefore casteless, communism as the age of Shudra “supremacy” (“Modern India” 469).

By the time Sukumari settles into her marriage, her life in Bombay, and most importantly, her participation in the Party, her trajectory of descent is coupled with dissent as she distances herself from the guru-like aspects of her older brother, just as Madeline does towards the end of the novel:

Her letters to me became more and more scarce. I was the arch-reactionary for her, and she hated me with the hate that brothers and sisters have for one another when they cannot agree. Besides, Sukumari having married Krishnamachari, her politics became an act of faith, a duty she owed to her happiness. (373)

Marxism thus becomes something of a religion for the younger sibling, and her initiation into the Party’s Indian chapters parallels Madeline’s self-conversion to Buddhism; both are born from desire and pleasure at the most personal level (“a duty she owed to her happiness”). There is not enough detail in the novel to discern whether or not there is something similarly “poetic” or liminal in Sukumari’s attraction to this ideology, but this nevertheless renders her a deviant figure in Rama’s eyes. Thus, just as Rama ends his relationship with Madeline, something similar takes place with Sukumari. Both women have not only pursued a way of life that he believes is based on personal choices. More importantly, they have both rejected him as their guru. These could be acts of resistance, but for Rama they signify deviance.
Thus, there is a long proliferation of religious deviants throughout the novel, many of whom are also exemplified as independent, female characters. This certainly betrays an undeniable trace of misogyny and heterosexism within the novel’s idealistic Indutva narrative. However, it also needs to be said that while there is some cultural coding to these depictions, there is also a minor attempt to avoid stereotyping or generalizations. Not all modern Indian women are as rebellious as Sukumari, and the example of Savithri is a good one of someone who began as a rebel, turned “poetic”, and eventually realized her discipleship. Similarly, the case of Madeline does not suffice as a representative for all French or Western women in the novel. She is characterized mostly by her refusals to transcend the “poetic” dimension of her Buddhist practice, to address her dualistic, Catholic dharma, and to absorb the guru-like presence of her husband. While Savithri’s trajectory certainly demonstrates a contrast to this, the case of Catherine is a stronger example of Rama’s ideal woman. She is a woman that has successfully been Sanskritized and therefore “Indianized” without any history of deviance, “poetic” or otherwise.

Catherine makes her first appearance in the novel as a shy, virginal and pious Catholic woman. Her parents regard these qualities as signs of naivety, inexperience, and dependency, but Rama reads them positively as signs of inner beauty:

she has maidenhood, she has innocence – in the Church sense, for in my sense she knew all that she should know as female and future mother – and she is a good Catholic. That she is not so much interested in metaphysical discourses might just as well be the one thing to be recommended in this case (152).

This lack of intellectual curiosity is precisely what distinguishes Catherine’s personal trajectory from women like Madeline, Savithri, and Sukumari. She is neither worldly nor eclectic, but she knows what she wants to be – a good Catholic wife and mother. Unlike Madeline or Savithri, she approaches Rama with neither an Orientalist interest in India nor a romantic one in the south, and the reason is because she lacks personal desire. Catherine, in Rama’s eyes, is the perfect embodiment of a woman who lives to fulfill her spiritual duty and therefore lives by the knowledge of her own dharma. She does not know anything about Hinduism, India, Neo-Vedanta, or the Truth, but she knows that it is
not her duty to do so. Not everyone has the Brahminical calling to know *brahman*, and Catherine knows well that she does not. As a result, unlike the other women in Rama’s life, Catherine never takes a “poetic” turn to religious deviancy. She is “pure” and her trajectory in the novel is of someone who lives for the silent pursuit of a more *dharmic* Self.

Catherine marries Georges, an Orientalist scholar, and gives birth to a daughter, Vera. She never appears to be dependent on Georges, and both appear to enjoy a marriage of peaceful coexistence, the kind that Rama has never experienced with any of the other women in his life. He shows his approval early on in the couple’s courtship:

I am convinced – and it needed little effort to convince me – that Catherine is the right wife, the perfect mate, the holy companion for Georges. If she had nothing in her, at least she would never be an emotional problem for Georges. And Georges above all needs calm and rest – for work and prayer. (153)

The couple may be of European descent, but their lifestyle is Brahminical. Georges may be an Orientalist, but his devotion to scholarly duty casts him as a Brahminical character, and it is Catherine who brings out these qualities in him. Rama’s domestic ideal is thus grounded on a *dharma* of gendered, heterosexual differences and duties. Again, this is Brahminical, but its significance is “Indian.”

The passages above also highlight Rama’s instrumental role in bringing this Sanskritized union to fruition. Catherine has an instinctive sense of womanly *dharma*, but she trembles at the thought of becoming a sexual being. In a moment of confidentiality, she alludes to her fear before Rama and he counsels her on the universal Truth of heterosexuality: “For women pain and continuance be one, and for men death and joy are one. And that is the mystery of creation.” (158). It is probably not necessary to exegete the meaning behind these cryptic words other than that it speaks to Rama’s ideal of gender roles and responsibilities at a level that is more metaphysical than social. Its greater significance is in the gestures of the characters’ dialogical performance. He gives her advice, she listens and he then consecrates the exchange ritualistically with the gift of a *rakhi* according to the tradition where sisters tie the sacred thread on the brother’s wrist...
as a symbol of her love as well as his protection. However, when Rama explains the custom to Georges, it carries the connotation of a certain intimacy that is deemed legitimate outside the space of marital relations. He draws a legend from Mughal Indian history to make his point: ‘‘Rani Padmavathi tied – a silken, a yellow silken thread, with gold on it – to Emperor Akbar, says the legend, and thus becoming his sister she could not become his bride.’’ (158). Thus, by honouring the Mughal sovereign as a brother, the Rajput queen used the rakhi to perform a gesture of familial hospitality and thus diminished the threat of a sexual encounter on the grounds that such an act would symbolically mark an incestuous transgression. Rama projects an awareness of such transgressions as he spontaneously performs the same ritual (although with a reversal in gender roles) and he also uses it to enact a deeper level of intimacy with Catherine. Although Catherine acknowledges Rama as her brother-in-law, the use of the rakhi authenticates her as his sister. Yet, at the end of the novel, a symbolic transgression is nevertheless hinted at when Catherine and Georges express their gratitude to Rama. Georges tells him, “We must have been brothers in a past life” and the next utterance from Catherine completes the family portrait: ‘‘I must have been your wife. That is why Vera knows you. Marriages are made in Heaven, they say, don’t they? Sometimes they are made on earth’’ (411). While the relationship between Catherine and Rama is far less physical and emotional than the one with Savithri, it still represents a form of symbolic transgression at the level of infidelity as well as incest. However, the taboo is arguably removed on the grounds that Catherine’s rhetoric of sisterly and wifely desire is grounded and stabilized within the dynamic of a guru-disciple relationship. He releases Savithri through a similar invocation, but then paradoxically finds himself attached to Catherine on the same pedagogical grounds. Furthermore, it is she (Catherine) who enunciates this bond through the performative language of her utterances.

The rakhi ritual is among the first steps Rama takes in initiating this “sacred” relationship, and it is eventually completed through his dialogues with Catherine at the end of the novel. Upon learning of Rama’s intentions to leave Europe for Travancore, Catherine pleads: ‘‘You don’t need to go to India for a job, Rama. You look after Vera. Vera loves you. She is quiet when you are here. And you can write your abstruse theories. I will give you back your small room. And Georges will translate your clever
ideas’” (410). Catherine misunderstands the reasons behind Rama’s travel plans, but she is clear in her recognition of his subjectivity as a Brahmin male who needs a space for scholarly contemplation as well as a woman to manage his household requirements. She longs to serve him as she would for Georges, if not more. In this regard, if Savithri represents the “Indian”, Upansadic ideal of Maitreyi, Catherine is closer to Yagnyavalyka’s first wife Katyayani. 69

Catherine also recognizes in Rama the ideal guru to her daughter, albeit in the guise of a caregiver. Interestingly, this relationship has already been fulfilled with Vera and as we see below, it involves a more explicit transmission of Sanskritic knowledge:

I am so happy with Vera that even when the maid is in there I tell her, ‘Go to a cinema, enjoy yourself. I will look after the baby.’ And sometimes I sent Georges and Catherine away to see a play or go and hear music. They see that I am really happy, and they let me be with their daughter. And when I am alone I sing to Vera – I sing her Sankara and Bharathihari, and tell her one day she shall know the name of Him to whom I have to go, though I have always known him without knowing His name. So to Travancore I will go, I tell Vera, ‘I will go there Vera, and think of you.’ (409)

I am not trying to suggest that there is an unspoken element of sexual desire on Rama’s part. As Dey so correctly points out, “Ramaswamy is happy only in that kind of relationship with a woman which is predominantly non-sexual” (68). However, it is within such asexual relationships that Rama derives a feeling of intimacy, one that does less for the emotions than his subjectivity as a male, Brahmin guru. It is also through these intimacies that he derives a position of power and authority, however impersonal. This position carries a mildly transgressive character, as his intimacies with Catherine and Vera do seem to blur the lines of sister/wife and daughter/lover respectively. Yet, for Rama, the taboo is removed because they are his disciples. It is also by addressing them

69 The parallel here is also established phonetically in the first syllable of both names, “Cath” and “Katya.”
as members of his family that he sees them as belonging to his own caste. Rama’s intimacies with both Catherine and Vera thus signal a double-movement: he announces his plan to seek his guru in Travancore, but the performativity of his verbal exchanges enunciates the event of his becoming a guru to his diasporic family, and with the female characters in particular. All of this takes place in France, despite Madeline’s parting orders to find himself “an Indian Maitreyi”. Madeline reiterates this again in a more peaceful tone when she writes to Catherine of the divorce: “He must marry someone younger from his own country. He will be happy with an Indian woman, I have no doubt” (399). Rama fails to find such a woman of his own country (let alone caste), and instead finds in Catherine a Sanskritized European as sister, spiritual wife, and disciple.

In their attempt to combine postcolonial theory with Advaita Vedanta, scholars Helen Tiffin and Arvind Sharma argue that the novel’s ending is really the beginning of the protagonist’s quest: “in the course of the novel Rama merely prepares himself to approach a spiritual teacher at the end of the novel… what ‘happens’ in Rama’s life in the novel is merely the preparation to approach the guru” (366). As Naik suggests, the teleology of this narrative is doubly an affirmation of Indianness: “The end of Rama’s quest at the feet of his Guru is in keeping with the spiritual tradition of India which gives the Guru the highest place in man’s quest for truth” (1972 91-92). Yet, as argued above, it is equally possible to read the novel’s ending through a reversal of the aforementioned ideals. Rama becomes a guru before completing the period of his discipleship in Travancore. There is also the paradox of culture and geography: he turns to India, only to become a transmitter of Indianness in the West. Thus, the novel closes with Rama as a Janus-faced character, but not as one who is trapped in a non-place of in-betweenness.

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70 The possibility of incestuous desire is similarly illustrated in Rama’s interactions with his own sister, Saroja. This is suggested early in the novel, when he encounters her for the first time since his departure from India: “Saroja was a strange sensation for me. Here was a mystery which I had never observed before: the girl becoming woman, and the thousand ways it shows itself, in shyness, in language, in prime presence. I had left India too young to know the sensibilities of a Brahmin girl. Saroja was thirteen when I left, Sukumari but nine years old. Saroja’s presence now obsessed me sometimes, like one of those nights with the perfume of magnolia” (52). She also becomes a parallel to both Savithri and Elizabeth II: “I could bow before Saroja and call her Queen” (52). While he never gives expression to any of these desires, they are registered through symbol, as is the case when he accidentally coughs up blood on Saroja’s wedding sari on the very day of her marriage, marking the cloth as a mock hymenal stain (269).
Rather, he purports to orient himself (and perhaps non-dualistically) in all directions, East and West as well as north and south. This conclusion also revises the Orientalist style of East-West civilizational polarities. In the horizons of Rama’s vision, all civilizations are becoming one in realizing their Truth. They are being Sanskritized and therefore becoming “Indian.” This is the tragicomic aspect of the novel’s climax – hence, the defamiliarization of Luxembourg as a place that evokes the same epiphanic feelings of Cape Comorin. Rama divorces his wife only to realize a new relationship with his sister-in-law, and this is also echoed with the allegory of a new postcolonial relationship between India and the West, just as the outcome of the affair with Savithri signals the birth of inter-regional harmony between north and south India. Divorce follows marriage only to be followed by the rediscovery of marriage in its most ideal form: that is, of a discipleship between a male guru and a female disciple. While these pedagogical intimacies have civilizational significance, they can also be read as echoes of the novel’s central civilizational spectacle: the 1953 coronation of Queen Elizabeth II.

Most scholars have treated the coronation scene as a background event within the novel’s historical setting, dealing with it only marginally. Its significance is either in the abstract as a symbolic affirmation of the eternal feminine principle, or it is read technically as a motif to assist in the maturation of Savithri’s character.71 The next section of this chapter offers a third interpretation, one that reads the event more closely and critically in tandem with the ideas of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy whose name is invoked in the preface to the coronation scene as well as Rao’s “Acknowledgements” at the end of the novel (412). Unlike previous scholars, I do not see the Queen’s coronation as merely a background event. It is one of the few moments in the novel where Rama makes a direct reference to an event of his own contemporary history, and it is also an event that he anticipates...

71 For the sake of brevity, I will summarize this history of interpretation with the following references: “The coronation of the queen is thus symbolic of the glorification of the feminine principle, incarnated in Savithri, for Rama” (Naik 1972 104); “His enthusiasm for the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth is born as much of his devotion to the feminine principle as the pervasive joy in London and the rest of the world” (Narasimhaiah 96); “There are numerous panegyrics on Woman, women, and womanhood; Rama’s contemplation of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II is the longest and loudest” (Parameswaran 1988 575); and “Ramaswamy’s glorification of the Feminine (the Queen’s Coronation occasions a veritable hymn to the Feminine…) is more in line with the Tantric concept of the Feminine” (Narayan 8).
throughout the middle sections of the novel. With regards to the novel’s core plot, the Queen’s coronation is also integral to Rama’s recovery of Indianness, though on distinctly diasporic terms and on a global scale.

3.5 The Globalization of Indianness

Though seemingly an apolitical, Brahminical, Neo-Vedantic metaphysician, Rama occasionally identifies himself as being passionate and ideologically committed to the preservation of monarchy as the most ideal of political institutions. In a conversation with Savithri’s colleague at Cambridge, he states firmly: “I’m a monarchist… and I honour the Queen” (356). Earlier on, he concludes a tense debate with Swanston, Savithri’s communist comrade: “I am the only Indian royalist” (192). In all cases, Rama is aware of how eccentric, controversial, and anachronistic this ideological position might appear to British leftists and postcolonial Indian nationalists alike. Yet, he is clear to distinguish the idea of being a royalist from that of a loyalist. The latter is a more appropriate descriptor for Savithri’s Maharajah father, who is also present in India to witness the coronation: “her father had been so loyal to the British that he had to be with them when they were crowning their queen” (351). Like his daughter in her imitation of Mirabai, the Maharajah’s intentions are romantic, born from the nostalgia of his former status during the period of British rule in India, but equally produced by his alienation from the leaders of Nehruvian India. As Savithri explains, “He feels it a part of his loyalty to himself. The Government of India, of course, has ignored him. He has been sent on no missions, even his privy purse has been reduced… He will be happy to be back among his Lord Sahibs” (351).

By contrast, there are no such traces of Raj nostalgia in Rama’s royalism. In the wake of Indian independence, the memory of colonial injustice remains as present and critical as ever in Rama’s consciousness. He is anti-colonial, but he favours the institution of monarchy because it signifies a radical shift in Britain’s collective consciousness where each individual discovers a non-dualistic sense of Self without Other:
London was esoteric and preparing for the crowning of another Queen; and Englishmen felt it would be a momentous insight of man into himself… The white man, I felt, did not bear his burden, but the Englishman did. That I, an Indian who disliked British rule, should feel this only revealed how England was recovering her spiritual destiny, how in anointing her Queen she would anoint herself. (201-02)

The slight reference to Rudyard Kipling’s poem “The White Man’s Burden” is a clever appropriation of colonial discourse on race and the civilizing mission. For Rama, the colonial rhetoric of bringing the “lamp of reason” to the darker races of the earth signified a lack of civility during the colonial era. True civilization – again, Sanskritization – requires acts of brahman-ical self-recognition, and the coronation is one such act on a mass scale. It is also an act performed according to the same philosophy of ritual experience that marked Rama’s view of the gandharva: that is, as an act of mutual anointment. The coronation is thus more than a political ceremony; for Rama, it is a ritual event marking the grand revelation of Neo-Vedantic Truth on the post-imperial stage of modern British history.

At its climax, the coronation generates a revelatory experience and a metaphysical awareness of universal oneness throughout the society:

There was about London a restrained effervescence, as though princes, Zulus, soldiers and politicians on horses, the very manipulators of electric lights on houses and towers, were, so to say, interchangeable entities. To be many is to be one, for when the many speak to the one in the many, one seems to speak to oneself. (361)

This oneness is reminiscent of similar revelatory spectacles in Forster’s Gokul Ashtami, except here the participants of the ritual are not composed of diverse classes and caste communities. Instead, they are comprised of various nationalities, many of which belong to what contemporary readers recognize as the British Commonwealth:
the Abyssinians, with their curled hair and white, long togas; the Zambezi Zulus with their split noses and their large masticating faces; the Pakistanis on their white, slim horses; the humble Hindu in his proud tights; the Japanese lady with her large smile; the Togo-islanders, the Canadians, the hearty loud-spoken Australians; the French with their indiscretions, the Germans with their boasts; yes, even the Soviets came to drink the beer of England. (359)

Rama’s descriptions verge on racial and ethnic stereotyping (especially in his depiction of Africans), but his narrative nevertheless presents an unconventional image of the coronation and British royalty in general. While the coronation is not exactly a celebration of the country’s post-imperial, multicultural citizenship, it is not presented as a scene of racial or cultural purity – that is, of white, Anglo-Saxon Englishness. Rather, it represents an internationalist spirit as well as a nationalist sense of hospitality, thus reminding us of Godbole’s internationalism as the “Indian way” in A Passage to India.

Secondly, if there is any evidence that the coronation was historically commemorated as spectacle of English pride that was deemed urgent at a time when the British imperial ego was being humbled during the early stages of decolonization, the reconstruction of the coronation in The Serpent and the Rope romanticizes it as a ritual of purification as the former empire attempts to atone itself for the violence of its modern history. Rama explains,

I was happy to see the English thus, in this new mood. There was no triumphant arrogance with them – as in the days of imperial grandeur – they were more centred in themselves, more sure and elevated. True, they did not have a clear conscience about Africa, but how relieved they seemed to have ‘washed their hands of India.’ I laughed and said to myself, ‘They have grown more Brahminical.’ (351)

The lack of resolution with regards to the British occupation of Africa reminds us that the process of decolonization is still at an early stage in the historical context of Rao’s novel, but it is nevertheless a process that has begun. For Rama, its significance lies chiefly in the affective turn away from the racist “burden” of governing the colonial Other and
towards the duties of cultivating a purer British self. The concept of purity here is defined by non-violence but also a commitment to a sense of dharma, inscribing both politics and citizenship with a religious dimension.

Although Rama describes this event of collective self-transformation as “Brahminical”, he does not necessarily suggest that the British have become a nation of Brahmins. Rather, as M. N. Srinivas would argue, they have undergone Sanskritization. As a collective, they offer a recognition of the Brahminical ideal as a state of brahman-ical oneness, civic dharma, and varnic harmony. The latter point on caste is never made explicit in Rama’s narrative, but it is troped through the rhetoric of gender. One example is in his panegyric odes to the Queen as a perfect embodiment of the eternal feminine principle:

The world was made for celebration, for coronation, and indeed even when the king is crowned it is the Queen to whom the Kingdom comes… for even when it is a King that rules, she is the justice, the bender of man in compassion, the confusion of kindness, the sorrowing in the anguish of all. Woman is the duality made for her own pools of mirroring and she crowns herself to show that man is not of this kingdom. Man cannot even die. Then he must absorb himself into himself and be being. The coronation is the adieu of man to the earth. Be gay, earth, be beautiful, for man must go. (358)

The Queen is idealized here in ways not unlike what we have already seen in Rama’s depictions of Catherine and Savithri: that is, a woman who realizes her duty to the material plane while man probes deeper into the metaphysical one. She is a public figure facing the world, projecting herself outwards to inspire man in his inward journey, taking him through death and penance towards the tragicomic pursuit of the deathless Self. Another sign of her Sanskritized civility is to be found when Rama exalts the Queen without a single utterance of her proper name; thus, she assumes her duties with a desire that purports to be wholly impersonal and more so than any other Sanskritized female character in the novel, including Rama’s disciples Savithri, Catherine and Vera.
Yet, as critics have argued, the coronation scene represents a celebration of what Rama regards as the feminine principle, the archetype that is instinctual to all women and which all women must live to fulfill because it is their duty and therefore *dharma*. For Simone de Beauvoir, this would be the perfect example of the heterosexism that divides the human race along gendered lines and yet succeeds in doing so by establishing the “myth” of the “Eternal Feminine” as an absolute truth. Given that Rama’s novel was published not too long after *The Second Sex*, one might want to read this section of the narrative as a direct confrontation with that era of Western feminist thought. Such archetypes, he suggests, are of a woman’s privilege and their embodiment is what elevates any woman to the impersonal ideal represented by Queen Elizabeth II.

If the factor of biology persuades anyone to accept Rama’s panegyric discourse as a “natural” fact, the factor of caste should make the artifice as well as the hierarchical aspects of it apparent and clearly problematic. The Queen is privileged above any would-be king, but not to the point of assuming power as a political head of state. She is a ceremonial figure and that alone lends her a sovereign sense of authority outside the powers of the king as well any politician. Yet, in the *varnic* context of ritual hierarchy, she is a *Kshatriya* figure not unlike the one that Savithri represents at the end of the novel. Savithri becomes a “queen” in Rama’s mind, but she also goes on to perform a similarly ceremonial function once she returns to Pratap: “‘Savithri Prize at the Allahabad Football Finals,’ I had read in some Indian newspaper, and seen Savithri giving away a prize to some sturdy fool” (395). As she performs these ceremonial duties, Savithri not only affirms her own queenship, but she doubly affirms the anointment of Rama as her Brahminical *guru* and thus comes to perform her role as a *Kshatriya* subject.

In the case of the British Queen’s coronation, the subjectivity of her Brahmin male *guru* counterpart is mystified. I argue that it is neither Rama nor is it the figure of the boatman

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72 de Beauvoir writes, “Thus, as against the dispersed, contingent, and multiple existences of actual women, mythical thought opposes the Eternal Feminine, unique and changeless…. To pose Woman is to pose the absolute Other, without reciprocity, denying against all experience that she is a subject, a fellow human being” (253).
on the Ganges, the *guru* waiting for Rama in Travancore. Rather, the *guru* is “India” itself. “India” is anointed as “the Guru of the world” (336). The latter phrase comes from Rama’s last dialogue with Madeline and thus takes on prophetic significance for the coronation episode. This “India” is not the India of Nehru and Pratap’s postcolonial modernity; it is the ideal of civilizational Indianness, that which finds its essence in the *jnanam* of Rama’s Neo-Vedantic episteme. This ideal is highlighted as the source of Rama’s crisis with Madeline, and it is the same one that is personified, masculinized, and anointed through the event of the Queen’s coronation. The personal tragedy of Rama’s marriage is thus resolved through the comic spectacle of *varnic* union along the impersonal lines of the novel’s civilizational allegory.

It is also worth noting that Rama is not actually present as a witness to the Queen’s coronation. The latter half of his narration reveals that he is hospitalized throughout the whole of the event as he awaits a thoracoplasty operation for his lung troubles; the latter is incidentally resolved in the anti-climax of this event. The minor detail of Rama’s hospitalization complicates his account of the coronation, qualifying it ambivalently as belonging to the mode of both mystical vision as well as hallucination. Thus, as a phantasmal event that cannot be located or verified in empirical terms, the coronation represents another case of heterotopic Indianness. It also gives us reason to further question Rama’s reliability as a narrator and whether or not we should continue to read the remaining dialogues with Savithri and Catherine ideally as informal rites of *guru*-disciple initiation. This element of instability creates room to raise these and other such questions, but they are nevertheless resolved through a reading of the frame that Rama constructs for his narration of the Queen’s coronation.

Scholars have generally avoided a thorough discussion of the passage that immediately precedes the episode, acknowledging the reference to its central historical figure – Ananda K. Coomaraswamy – but nothing more beyond the mere mention of his name (Naik 1972 93; Narasimhaiah 78; Sethi 197; and Alterno 131). While that passage itself makes no direct reference to the Queen’s coronation, I read it as a preface to the event. It is a passage where Rama suddenly shifts the tone of the narrative and indulges in a moment of literary criticism. He evaluates the work of various Western Orientalists and
their success in grasping the essential Indianness of life in South Asia. Despite the problems with his French wife and her Orientalist sensibilities, Rama nevertheless praises the French Indologists: “the best interpreters of India in the west have been mostly French (I am thinking mainly of Senart, Levi, Guenon, Grousset, Masson-Oursel, Pryzulski)” (356-57). He acknowledges a handful of Britishers (“Sir William Jones, Sir John Woodroffe – more Brahmin than any Brahmin”) for similar intellectual achievements, but none of them earn the same accolades as Coomaraswamy (357). Rama explains,

This Boston Brahmin, Ananda Coomaraswamy, was more of a smartha, a true, an orthodox Indian than some tottering old President of the Indian National Congress. India would never be made by our politicians and Professors of Political Science, but by these isolate existences of India, in which India is rememorated, experienced, and communicated, beyond history, as tradition, as the Truth. Anybody can have the geographic – even the political – India, it matters little. But this India of Coomaraswamy, who will take it away, I ask you, who? Not Tamurlane or even Joseph Stalin. (357)

Rama’s praise for Coomaraswamy represents more than a non sequitur moment of critical reflection on Orientalist scholarship. Rather, it voices a response to his question over the modern amnesia of Indianness. Let us recall his thoughts on Savithri’s letter where he critiques both the culture of the former princely state Rajahs and that of the Nehruvian nationalists: “It would in fact be nobody’s India, till someone sat and remembered what India was” (380). Coomaraswamy is arguably the novel’s key agent for remembering Indianness in spite of the historical challenges of Islamic invasions (“Tamurlane”) as well as the future possibility of communist revolution (“Joseph Stalin”).

What is most interesting about the passage is Rama’s insistence on privileging Coomaraswamy above all European Orientalists as well as his (and Rao’s) fellow south Indian, Neo-Vedantin contemporary, Sarvapelli Radhakrishnan – the “tottering old President of the Indian National Congress”. Rao’s reasons for privileging the latter over
the former are not readily apparent in the novel. Both Radhakrishnan and Coomaraswamy participated in the modern revivalism of Neo-Vedanta, re-imagining it as a philosophical, religious, and metaphysical basis of Indian civilization, and they similarly sought to reclaim *varna* as a legitimate form of social order. Where Coomaraswamy departs from Radhakrishnan is in his lack of commitment to the idea of Indian nationalism and perhaps his identity as a diasporic, bi-cultural South Asian. Coomaraswamy was born in Columbo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) to a Tamil father and an English Mother. He studied in Britain, lived in both colonial Ceylon and (south) India, and eventually became a resident of the United States until his death in 1947; Rao’s “Boston Brahmin” tag is also a playful reference to his career as a curator of Indian art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. From the perspective of contemporary postcolonial theory, Coomaraswamy might be seen as a figure of hybridity. Interestingly enough, Rama shares a similar sense of identity, as there are moments in *The Serpent and the Rope* where he self-identifies as a “European Brahmin” as well as a “French Vedantin” (286). By contrast, it is fair to say that such strong claims to hybridity are less likely to come forth from the mouth of a nationalist Neo-Vedantin like Radhakrishnan.

It is also evident that Rama and Coomaraswamy’s sense of hybridity is not to be taken as a deviant or “poetic” form of cultural in-betweeness. As we have already seen in the Queen’s coronation scene, Rama’s hybridity signifies a non-dualist approach to culture and a monistic view of the world: the world is becoming one because it is becoming “Indian”; and conversely, the oneness of this global Indianness represents a transcendence of hybridity and other related articulations of difference. As a result, the concept of global Indianness is represented as a process, one that takes place in stages, but it also follows a spatial logic. The recovery of Indianness in the Queen’s coronation doubly represents a de-territorialization of this civilizational ideal from the political geography of modern India. It is by no accident of his diasporic predicament that Rama turns to the Occidental setting of London, England as the stage where this process commences; the West is similarly privileged in the prophecy that Coomaraswamy offers at the end of “What has India Contributed to Human Welfare,” the first essay in *The Dance of Shiva* collection.
Like his fellow Neo-Vedantins, Gandhi and Vivekananda, Coomaraswamy envisions modernity as a two-fold problem: it is the age of democracy, industrialism and capitalism; it is therefore the age of the Vaishya subject, dominated by a mercantile spirit of competition. Coomaraswamy elaborates further: “Where modern Industrialism prevails, the Brahman, Kshattriya and Shudra alike are exploited by the Vaishya, and where in this way commerce settles on every tree there must be felt continual anxiety about a bare subsistence” (6). The varnic ascendancy of the Vaishya subject on a global scale is thus regarded as the source of exploitation, poverty and ultimately, civilizational decay; Rama’s descriptions of Bombay in The Serpent and the Rope affirm the same critique.

In The Serpent and the Rope, the Vaishya subjectivity of Rama’s Bombay is imagined in geographic terms: it belongs to neither the Kshatriya north nor the Brahminical south; it is the economic capital of modern India, and the landmark of the Gateway to India monument signifies the country’s central point of contiguity to the capitalist circuits of Western modernity.73 Coomaraswamy’s critique of the Vaishya spirit is comparatively imagined as a historical problem: that is, one of colonial as well as postcolonial modernity, but also one of Brahminical displacement. His problem is not with the West nor is it with a Vaishya subjectivity per se. Rather, for Coomaraswamy, it is the lack of a pedagogical authority in the field of politics, governance, and the economy. He argues that the contemporary Kshatriya subject’s secular disregard for the Brahmin is responsible for this critical moment in history where both upper-caste elites are now equally displaced from their varnic status and authority, not to mention obstructed in fulfilling all obligations to their dharma. It is for similar, though less clearly stated reasons, that Rama arguably has so much distaste for the Nehruvian nationalist project. Though Coomaraswamy’s essay was originally written in 1915, his anxiety parallels that of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century critics and theorists over the possibility that transnational corporate agents hold powers that are above those of the traditional

73 The monument is referred to indirectly in Rao’s novel during the episode of his affair with Lakshmi. Her home is located in Colaba and therefore stands in close proximity to the Gateway of India.
nation-state. This sense of foresight gives the essay a prophetic quality, not because of its accuracy but of how intensely it attempts to critique the modern present while envisioning the face of a new “idealistic” future (20).

What follows in the remainder of Coomaraswamy’s non-fictional Indutva narrative is a strongly seductive argument on the legitimacy of what he calls “Brahman sociology” (12); the history of practicing this sociology in pre-colonial India, Japan and therefore Asia in general; and finally, a call to the West to not only acknowledge this precedent but to embrace it as the answer to its own contemporary problems. I use the term “seductive” here with regards to the ideological ambivalence of Coomaraswamy’s rhetoric. On one hand, he reclaims the institution of a Brahminical authority through a romantic turn to the pre-capitalist past: “The problem of modern Europe is to discover her own aristocracy and to learn to obey its will” (6). On the other hand, he employs a pseudo-Marxist mode of rhetoric and presents the system of varna as an ideal for the post-capitalist future, yet one that was first realized in pre-colonial India:

the Brahmanical caste system is the nearest approach that has yet been made towards a society where there shall be no attempt to realize a competitive equality, but where all interests are regarded as identical. To those who admit the variety of age in human souls, this must appear to have been the only true communism. (15-6)

It is in passages like these that Coomaraswamy is most sly; he makes a rhetorical appeal to the politics of the intended reader and thus simultaneously affirms his politics of varnic sociology and religious orthodoxy. This is not unlike Rao in his acknowledgement of historical-materialism as a civilization of Truth and his subsequent belittlement of it as less hospitable, inclusive, and liberal than Vedanta.

Coomaraswamy’s rhetoric of caste and class differences is similarly ambivalent. He translates the concept of a Brahmin-Kshatriya alliance in clearly elitist terms: “aristocracy”. He also argues for equality among all members within any given caste, and maintains that all such castes are “self-governing” (16). This, he tells us, is the Indian antecedent for both “democracy” and “Guilded Socialism” (16-7). This interplay of
rhetoric and theory, progressive politics and religious orthodoxy is both seductive and confusing, and it certainly has its fictional parallels in Rao, not to mention in Gandhi and Vivekananda. In either case, to gain a better and more critical understanding, one must discern the author’s underlying use of centripetal logic as he extends his narrative out to the language and vocabulary of Western modernity, only to pull it back into a referential worldview of orthodox religion, social hierarchy and metaphysics. The situation here is thus one where all the fashionable concepts are in place for the politically liberal or leftist reader, but their referents have been rewritten within the author’s unyielding and highly anti-modernist worldview.

While Coomaraswamy asserts India’s history of democratic practices, he maintains that India is (never was and never should be) a democracy proper. As he suggests in the passage above, competition is a central aspect of capitalist practice, but also a product of social equality; this is the result of a culture where the ideology of a collective Vaishya subjectivity thrives without the discipline of a presiding Brahminical authority. Coomaraswamy similarly allows for equality within the collective space of individual castes (the occupational “guilds” of jati) but not within the impersonal whole of varnic order. The reason is a matter of one’s responsibility to the duties or dharma of their caste. Coomaraswamy explains this further through an essentialist comparison with Western conventions on the issue of punishment:

The nature of the difference between a Brahman and a Shudra is indicated in the view that a Shudra can do no wrong, a view that must make an immense demand upon the patience of the higher castes, and is the absolute converse of the Western doctrine that the King can do no wrong. These facts are well illustrated in the doctrine of legal punishment, that that of the Vaishya should be twice as heavy as that of the Shudra, that that of the Kshattriya twice as heavy again, that of the

74 As with Mill and Hegel, Coomaraswamy is playing off the double registers of caste as inscribed in the terminology of jati and varna. Neither of the latter terms are used in this particular essay and that certainly works to further mystify the politics of his argument (i.e., jati as equitable, and varna as hierarchy). It also strengthens the rhetorical power of this essay in its attempt to persuade the modern, liberal Anglophone reader.
Brahman twice or even four times as heavy again in respect of the same offence; for responsibility rises with intelligence and status. (16)

Social hierarchy, he insists, is natural as an object of desire, but it is produced through action, not by the fact of one’s birth or race. By action, he means the fulfillment of duty, and more importantly, through an (impersonal) identification with the harmonious order (rta) of that hierarchy. All castes are equal in terms of their internal membership and therefore at the level of community (jati). Yet, all castes are subject to the hierarchy of varna that places the Brahmins and other such religious, philosophical, scholarly, and ritual elites in the position of highest authority. Still, all castes and even individuals are deemed equal when their actions (if not they themselves) contribute to both a realization and an affirmation of universal oneness: “It has been just remarked that “the lowest pariah hanging to the skirts of Hindu society is in a sense as much the disciple of the Brahman ideal as any priest himself”” (18). The idea of identification here parallels the universal recognition of Neo-Vedantic knowledge that permeates the narrative of The Serpent and the Rope, and the oscillating movement between forms of equality and hierarchy also evokes similar patterns of inclusion and inequality in Forster’s Gokul Ashtami. However, in the case of Coomaraswamy, his use of centripetality underscores and disciplines all rhetorical gestures of modern freedom with a Neo-Vedantic – a varnashramadharmonic – awareness of an increasingly impersonal, overarching, and transcendent principle of cosmic order.

In an entirely different register, the same rhetoric is operative when Coomaraswamy claims that a varnic society is “the only true communism” (16). However, there is also the suggestion that a truly classless society should not go to the extremes of establishing itself as a casteless one. Poverty and exploitation can be eradicated through an uneven division of labour along varnic caste lines, and more importantly through an ethical commitment to mutual caste cooperation (rather than competition). It is through acts of inter-caste cooperation that the material plane of social organization becomes a mirror of the metaphysical ideal. This act of identification culminates in rta, but just as Rama translates this elevated state as “civilization” (sanskritii), Commaraswamy conceptualizes it as devanagari, the Indian “City of the Gods” (5). Devanagari is incidentally the same
name of the script used for writing Sanskrit. The Indian “City of the Gods” is then not only the “true communism”, but it is also the city founded on Sanskrit-based, Neo-Vedantic knowledge – Rama’s jnanam. In short, devanagari is Coomaraswamy’s ideal city of Indianness.

The idea of devanagari is undeniably utopian, but Coomaraswamy also refutes that critique by imagining his ideal in non-static terms: “The building of that city anew is the constant task of civilization; and though the details of our plan may change, and the contour of our building, we may learn from India to build on the foundations of the Religion of Eternity.” (5). The idea of constant renewal suggests a temporal paradox. The form of civilization is subject to change, at least at the level of artifice and appearance, and yet, change as such does not hold historical significance because the measurement of civilization is metaphysical. As a result, Coomaraswamy’s ideal city of Indianness transcends a linear narrative of historical progress. For this reason, his rhetoric of communism represents an appeal to Marxism as well as Hegelianism, as caste harmony and civilization are imagined as the ideal substitutes for class struggle, and the end of History is rewritten as a leap into Eternity. It is with this leap that communism becomes “true”, civilized, Sanskritized and Indianized.

Coomaraswamy’s position on caste is rhetorically persuasive, and though it grounds itself with evidence reflecting his unparalleled erudition (he cites everything from Marx and Nietzsche to Manu and the Buddhist Dhammapad), the essay “What has India Contributed?” remains significant as a work of rhetorical argument, rather than a piece of scholarly research. As with Rama’s approach to Vedanta and Vivekananda’s varnic revision of India’s civilizational history, there is no real reason for anyone to take Coomaraswamy’s essay seriously as a sociological study of caste practices, let alone a history of subcontinental Indian cultures – at least not by the standards of contemporary academic methodologies. His approach to the discourse of Indianness is one of Neo-Vedantic imagination, grounded in rhetorical persuasion and elements of fictional imagination. These latter aspects of the essay are most conspicuous in the conclusion, where Coomaraswamy shifts his apologist tone to one of prophecy.
For all of his critiques of the West and its lack of Brahminical aristocracy, his final thoughts reveal an unexpected portrait of the postcolonial world and an urgent call for “co-operation” across national boundaries (20). Intuiting the political and technological advancements of India, Japan and Asia as a whole, Coomaraswamy envisions a bizarre allegorical drama on the field of global modernity:

Let us understand first that what we see in India is a co-operative society in a state of decline. Western society has never been so highly organized, but in so far as it was organized, its disintegration has proceeded much farther than is yet the case in India. And we may expect that Europe, having sunk into industrial competition first, will be the first to emerge. The seeds of a future co-operation have long been sown, and we can clearly recognize a conscious and perhaps also unconscious, effort towards reconstruction. (20)

Coomaraswamy’s vision of a globalized future, where the modernity of nationalist politics, technological innovation, and free-market capitalism is increasingly inclusive of the soon-to-be postcolonial East (the South of Africa, the Americas, the Caribbean, and the Pacific are conspicuously and conveniently absent from his prophecy on the future state of the world). All of these historical phenomena are represented and re-imagined as part of a tragicomic, civilizational theatre of History, where the independence of modern India is viewed ironically as the sign of its decay because its postcolonial rulers are likely to continue in their mimicry of Western models of progress. Such cynicism is not unlike that which Forster voices in his treatment of Aziz and the Nationalist Committee. Yet, where Forster imagines the Gokul Ashtami in a heterotopic zone within the non-colonial space of central India’s princely states, Coomaraswamy anticipates a resurgence of Brahminical culture in an entirely different location outside of India and thus in the West. As a result, the West is imagined as a de-territorialized site of future civilizational reversal – “Europe, having sunk into industrial competition first, will be the first to emerge.” Just as Marx sees capitalism as the stage that enables proletarian revolution, Coomaraswamy awaits a time when the \textit{Vaishya} ethos is fully exhausted and thus leaves no other option but \textit{varnic} revolution. However, the revolution must follow a scripted sequence of events: it is the Western \textit{Vaishya} subject that will be displaced first; whether
or not its Asian counterpart will follow due to having arrived at a similar point of
exhaustion or out of continued forms of colonial mimicry is never clearly stated.
Regardless, Coomaraswamy believes that ultimately it is the West that will heroically
lead the way for no other reason than the fact that it must do so as a dharmic response to
its own internal decay, but also for having encountered the threat of an enemy Other in
modern, industrialized Asia and more generally because the age of global capitalism, an
era in which Japan, China, and India are all regarded as super-economic rivals to both the
United States and the former European imperialists, will have arrived. The role of the
West in its relationship to itself, Asia and therefore the world is thus one of duty or
dharma: the West is to become Brahminical and Sanskritized, and it must also rebuild
itself as an Occidental devanagari city of gods in order for India, the East, and
consequently the globe to arrive at more civilized stage of being.

This process of globalizing Indianness ironically follows the Eurocentric paradigms of
Western historicism – “first in the West, and then elsewhere” – that Dipesh Chakrabarty
critiques in Provincializing Europe, thus betraying an Orientalist style that remains at the
heart of Coomaraswamy’s anti-modern, post-Hegelian discourse (6). This paradigm is
also echoed in The Serpent and the Rope. According to the novel’s chronology of events,
the Queen of England is crowned before Savithri realizes her wifely Kshatriya dharma. It
is also significant that Rama’s narrative of the latter is far less rhapsodic than his
reconstruction of the Queen’s coronation. Savithri has absorbed some of the latter’s spirit
when she assumes her ceremonial function to award “some sturdy fool”, but her
performance represents a mere trickle of the spread of Indianness from West to East.
Thus, while the post-imperial centre of the world is becoming Indian, modern India
nevertheless remains on the margins of this imagined new world order.

If there is a difference between Coomaraswamy and Rama’s prophecies of global
Indianness, perhaps it lies at the level of tone. For Coomaraswamy, modern India’s
descent into industrialism and materialism represents a kind of civilizational tragedy, one
that the subcontinent may or may not recover from. By contrast, Rama emphasizes the
transcendent over the tragic and this is partly because he acknowledges the validity of
systems like communism, Marxism, and historical-materialism. We have already seen
this in his dialogue with Madeline over the placelessness of the “poetic”, but it is also reiterated in his dialogue with Savithri. On an early visit to England, he tells her, “Talking of the communists the other day in Cambridge, I forgot to say that communism must succeed; happily for us, to be followed by Kingship” (206). Rama’s hopes for communism are ironically Hegelian. They have less to do with the struggles and triumphs of the working proletariat than with the anticipation that the revolutionary emergence of communism and the anti-climax of “Kingship” marks the end of History. However, Rama performs a variation on this teleology by arguing for “Vedanta” as the true end of History. Rama explains this further in his conversation with Savithri’s friends Lakshmi and Sharifa,

‘Someone before the war wrote a book, Forward from Liberalism. Now someone must write, Forward from Marxism.’

‘Forward to what?’ asked Sharifa.

‘To Vedanta,’ I said…

‘You are going back in time?’ remarked Lakshmi.

‘In Vedanta there is no going back or forward – just as in Indian music there can be nothing new, for all that is musical has been included in Indian raga. You can only sing and create, hour after hour, day after day, as our musicians do – like Fayyaz Khan did when he sang Khelatha nanda kumar for four nights on end. In the same way Indian history plays a melody to itself, creating and re-creating itself, standing not against sound but in silence. India is apart, that is why she has no history….’ (195)

Once again, the Hegelian grand narrative is validated, though on two separate counts: the view of History as a series of linear stages; and of India as lacking history. Yet, both of these ideas are radically subverted within Rama’s Indutva perspective. His civilizational ideals of monarchy, varni order and “Vedanta” are do not mark a fourth stage, but rather a coda to History – hence, the generic shift from a theatrical mode to one of music. “Vedanta” represents an entirely different mode of performance, especially in its approach to time. Thus, while Rama asserts India “has no history”, he does so without the sense of “incapability” that marks the rhetoric of Hegelian discourse. Instead, Indianess is held up as transcendent to History because, like the music of Fayyaz Khan, the non-
dualism of “Vedanta” comes into view from a position beyond linear time. Finally, for Rama, the end of History is anticipated as neither a modern nor a post-modern event because “Vedanta” translates literally as “the end of the Vedas”. The end of History then is equally the birth of Vedanta and therefore signifies the trans-historicity of Indianness globally throughout all historical epochs and in the case of The Serpent and the Rope, all geo-cultural spaces within and beyond subcontinental India.

Conclusion

If Indianness in Forster’s A Passage to India marks the limits of both colonial and postcolonial modernity, the vision Rao presents in The Serpent and the Rope is not one of counter-modern resistance but rather one of Indianness transcending modernity. Indianness is transcendent as such because it is proposed as a project that goes beyond modernity; it might even be called ‘postmodern’ but I would hesitate to use that term given its post-structuralist connotations.

It is also important to see Rao’s Indutva narrative as one of civilizational transcendence rather than one of cultural revivalism rooted in nostalgia, especially within a diasporic context. Meenakshi Mukherjee emphasizes the latter in her reading of the novel: “the fond description of these rituals has its birth in the sentimental longing of the writer himself, an expatriate Indian, who sees all traditionally Indian actions enveloped in a mist of nostalgia” (Mukherjee 1971 150). Yet, as argued throughout this chapter, there is evidence in the novel that Rama is not only aware, but disenchanted, with modern India’s materialist realities. His romanticism for tutelage under a guru in a south Indian ashram remains strong, but the conclusion of the novel finds him looking westwards and envisioning the transcendence of European modernities – symbolically through the Queen’s coronation and more literally through his new relationships with Catherine’s family. India the nation-state is thus left behind for the dawn of Indianness, de-territorialized and revealed as such in the post-imperial West. This is prophecy, not nostalgia.
The Indianness of *The Serpent and the Rope* also distinguishes itself from that of *A Passage to India* through its articulation of “poetic” in-betweenness. The “poetic” marks the limits of the non-metaphysical, the non-centripetal and therefore, the deviant, as represented by symbols of Western Orientalism and Buddhism (Madeline); north Indian *saguna bhakti* and “Hindu” femininity (Savithri); Nehruvian nationalism (Pratap); Indian communism (Sukumari); and Bombay capitalism (Lakshmi). As Rama argues, the “poetic” can only be transcended through a centripetal orientation to Neo-Vedanta, yet Neo-Vedanta does not require all to become philosophers – not everyone can become a Brahmin. Instead, each individual must discover their *dharma* in order to fulfill it and in ways that doubly inscribe *dharma* with *varna*.

Interestingly enough, Rama’s engagement with *varna* is limited to only the top three subjectivities of the *chaturvarna* scheme: the twice-born (*dwija*) members of the Brahmin, *Kshatriya* and *Vaishya* castes. There are few, if any, references to the role of *shudra* or Dalit subject. The reason for this blind spot arguably comes back to Rama’s re-definition of the Brahmin as a *guru* and thus as a figure of pedagogical, rather than a ritual, authority; his focus is on a hierarchy of knowledge, rather than of pure and polluted subjects. The *guru* as such is central to his Indutva critiques of capitalist, communist, and nationalist modernities. To reiterate, for him, the problem with these political projects is the absence or displacement of a *guru* and therefore the lack of knowledge or *jnanam* as a set of sovereign principles to which all individuals as well as ideas are centripetally oriented. Without the *guru*, the *Kshatriya* dominates (as in the case of Nehruvian India) or worse, the *Vaishya* (as in the case of Bombay). Yet, what this vision means for Dalits and other marginalized groups is something which Rama never addresses in the novel, and this is indeed a problem, politically as well as theoretically.

Although the question of distinguishing Indutva from Hindutva has been resolved in previous chapters of this dissertation, it is worth returning to this question in the specific context of *The Serpent and the Rope*. For Rumina Sethi, one of the few postcolonial scholars to have engaged Rao’s novels, the collusion between Rama’s worldview and that of contemporary Hindutva is hardly coincidental. She writes,
While Rama’s India lies outside history, the Hindu right-wing in India have brought their monolithic India well within the compass of history. In the last decade or so, the metaphysical nature of the religious accounts of India has been completely refashioned to produce a history of Ayodhya which in the India psyche had always existed on the psychological rather than on the literal plane. By giving a historical account of events, right-wing ‘historians’ now claim to have reached the truth, to a geographical certainty about the exact location of the Hindu god Rama’s birthplace… (Sethi 174-5)

The problem with this critique is evident in Sethi’s conflation of metaphysics (Vedanta) and mythology (Ayodhya and the Ramayana). As discussed in section 3.2, the epistemological differences between myth and metaphysics are quite distinct, and particularly so for Rama and Savithri in their contrasting approaches to bhakti. For Rama, to muddle these differences is to follow the same deviant path that Savithri follows for the majority of the novel. While it would have been interesting to ask Rao himself what he thought of Hindutva groups like the BJP, the RSS, and the Shiv Sena, the answer is arguably available through an extrapolation of Rama’s worldview in The Serpent and the Rope. I speculate that his support for a BJP government in India would be no different than what we have already seen in his critiques of Nehruvian nationalism – and it is worth noting that Rao was actually affiliated with Nehru during the independence movement. The Hindu-ness of the BJP would not interest him any more than secularism of the Congress; the real question is whether the BJP would ever uphold the pedagogical authority of India’s Neo-Vedantic, Brahminical gurus above the powers of its politicians, let alone of what Aijaz Ahmad refers to as its “safron” wing of neo-liberal capitalists (2000 231). It is probably fair to say that all Hindutva groups have strong upper-caste interests, but any social scientist would be hard pressed to find any such group wholly affirming the varnic subjectivity of a Brahminical guru as dominant in both theory and practice when many of these groups are themselves composed of diverse varnic caste communities.

Ultimately, the real problem with Rao’s Indutva is not that it can potentially slip into Hindutva rhetorical modes, but rather that it denies the reader agency to raise critical
questions around power. Much of this is reinforced through Rao’s choice of form. As Sethi astutely points out, The Serpent and the Rope is composed as a modern, highly Sanskritic and specifically Upanisadic text. She explains: “Translated, Upanishads mean ‘to sit near.’ The Upanishadic tradition necessitates that the reader/initiate should sit close to the author/teacher in order to learn of Truth” (Sethi 164 Footnote 30). As with many of Rama’s personal relationships, the Upanisadic mode of the guru demands intimacy, but it also entails “an unquestioning acceptance of the teaching, and requires a complete belief in the system of knowledge” – in this case, a knowledge of Indianness (164).

However, I would not go so far as to argue that this is a form of theocractic tyranny – a classic early Orientalist stereotype of Brahmins as godmen. 75 Rather, when a character like Savithri or Catherine willfully denies their agency in order to be disciplined as Rama’s disciples, they enter a relationship of impersonal intimacy. Conversely, for Rama, the power assumed from being a male, Brahminical guru comes from a place of dharma and therefore impersonal desire – or at least, that is what he believes and conveys in this novel. However, when reading The Serpent and the Rope in context with The God of Small Things, it becomes apparent that Rama’s rhetorical emphasis on the impersonal entails a sense of blindness to the possibility of violence when the notion of the personal is devalued as it is so often is in his Indutva narrative. For this reason, the final chapter of this dissertation turns to Roy’s novel as counter-Indutva narrative as an opportunity to engage an internal critique of the impersonal as well as casteism and other key tropes of civilizational Indianness.

75 Unfortunately, this is the stereotype that Sethi affirms in her understanding of the Upanisadic mode: “An Upanishadic narrative underscores the sacral nature of the relationship of the guru and the shishya or disciple, which works on the assumption that the guru is the divine repository of knowledge, being thus invested by the gods themselves. It is therefore part of the shishya’s religious duties to make his guru his god.” (Sethi 164)
Chapter 4 Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*

4 Preface

To some, Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* might seem an unlikely choice for a literary study of Indianness. The novel is set within a non-Hindu socio-religious context: the Syrian Christian community of Kerala. Its narrative also lacks any direct references to Neo-Vedanta. One critic has gone so far as to argue that

> Arundhati Roy’s novel is not ‘about India,’ not even in a microcosmic way, because her fictional universe concentrates on a minority community within one specific state, and on its relations with outcastes: Muslims, for instance, are hardly mentioned at all. (Pesso-Miquel 23)

Aside from the bizarre suggestion that Muslim characters are essential to all novels “about India”, the observations made above have some validity. Unlike G. V. Desani’s *All About H. Hatterr* or Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, *The God of Small Things* is not a novel that takes the entirety of India (as a subcontinent or a nation-state) as its central *topos*. Its plot is primarily concerned with incidents that take place in a village. Yet, unlike Rao’s *Kanthapura* or R. K. Narayan’s *Malgudi* novels, Roy’s *Ayemenem* is not wholly constructed as a fictional representation of everyday Indian life, be it in a realist or allegorical mode, and one should be similarly cautious in reading it as an authentic portrayal of “south” India – a setting that it otherwise shares with Rao and Narayan.

Nevertheless, *The God of Small Things* can be read as an Indutva narrative and more specifically as a counter-Indutva novel. It envisions a civilizational idea of Indianness

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76 The sublimations of the local to the national or civilizational in Narayan’s work has been observed by Chelva Kanaganayakam: “Narayan’s Malgudi, too, belongs to Tamil Nadu, although Narayan is always at pains to remove referential markers from his fictional world, in order to serve his allegorical intention of offering a microcosm of India” (2001 318).
using tropes, allegories, and other devices and rhetorical strategies that echo Forster and Rao, not to mention Coomaraswamy and other Neo-Vedantic writers. However, unlike the latter, Roy’s novel uses these strategies subversively to critique caste and the larger systems that are responsible for the violence that is done against Dalits as well as other minorities and social transgressors. This critique of a uniquely form of “Indian” violence is political as well as metaphysical, and it also involves both reinventions of both pre-colonial bhakti traditions and Hegel’s rhetoric of capital-H History.

The method of this chapter follows a reversal of the approaches used previously in the chapters on A Passage to India and The Serpent and the Rope. In each case of the latter, the idea of Indianness has been examined through a close reading of how “India” is imagined and rhetorically introduced within each novel. With Passage, the discussion of Indianness began with a look at India as a “muddle”, and with Serpent, it began with a comparison of Rama and Madeline’s metaphysical differences. In both cases, the discussion was further developed through an exploration of Godbole and Rama’s Neo-Vedantic worldview. In the case of The God of Small Things, the representation of caste is the starting point of my analysis, and each of the six sections are presented sequentially as part of larger project to map out Roy’s tropology of Indianness as well as her allegorical critique of various power dynamics, ranging from the social realm of caste subjectivity to the subcontinental realm of civilizational essences. If Indianness is a “Big Thing” in this novel, then caste is the “Small Thing” that serves as its foundation as a counter-Indutva narrative.

Section 4.1 examines how caste is articulated at two different levels of discourse: the intersection of personal and professional narratives; and the dual-rhetoric of jati and Roy’s allegorical system of “Un/Touchability.” This system of managing Touchable and Untouchable caste differences is similar to some aspects of varna: i.e., its use as a vertical axis of measuring differences in purity and pollution; and its significance of theorizing caste as a mode of subjectivity, agency, and power. However, the thrust of this section is ultimately on the uniqueness of Roy’s Un/Touchable rhetoric.
Sections 4.2 and 4.3 further explore the politics of Untouchable and Touchable modes of subjectivity. Section 4.2 presents a generational comparison of the novel’s two central Untouchable characters – Velutha and his father, Vellya Paapen – as symbols of silent resistance and submissive discipline, respectively. The position of the body and its complex relationship to voice is central to this reading of Untouchable subjectivity in the novel. The significance of the latter is then further developed in section 4.3 through a deconstruction of Touchable subjectivity. Drawing on Frantz Fanon, the power dynamics of Roy’s imagined system of Un/Touchability are analyzed through concepts of dependency, recognition, and perception.

The last three sections of this chapter mark a shift in focus from the Small to the Big Things of Roy’s counter-Indutva narrative. These sections use the previous readings of Un/Touchability to map out the novel’s imagined metphysics of power. The latter phrase is a play on the notion of a “physics of power” that Roy has used in her political essays, and it is adapted here to highlight the similarities between her novel and other Indutva narrators for whom the relationship between caste and Indianness is always metaphysical (Barsamian and Roy 44-6). In the case of The God of Small Things, the Touchable subject is at the centre of Roy’s metphysics and positioned in a place of “bipolar” anxiety with two different sets of taboo: polluted Untouchable bodies and sacred Big Things. The Big Things of Roy’s novel are comprised of familial, legal, and political institutions, all of which are imagined as part of a larger network of power. For Roy’s Touchable characters, power as such is sought through proximity to the “auras” of these Big Things, and it is paradoxically lost through their “entanglement” with their systems, thus producing a strong sense of Touchable anxiety. Furthermore, it is significant that power is also represented in the novel as an object of personal desire, and this is highlighted as one point of distinction between Roy’s Touchables and both Forster and Rao’s fictional, Neo-Vedantic Brahmins.

The concept of the “Big” is further expounded in section 4.5 through an exegesis of Roy’s allegory on the Small God’s conflict with the Big God. The rhetoric of “Big” and “Small” is interpreted here as a set of signifiers for the conceptual dynamics of the “impersonal” and “personal”, thus rendering the pseudo-mythical conflict of the Gods as
a commentary on the political devaluation of all “Small” and personal bodies and ideas in the novel. The allegory of the Big and Small Gods is also one of the few instances where “India” is introduced to the discourse of the novel, but it is read here as a critique of violence that is characteristic of a civilizational notion of Indianness, rather than merely the postcolonial Indian nation-state, and this reading is presented doubly as a critical reconsideration of Jameson’s theory of “national allegory” and its relevance to the novel.

Finally, section 4.6 closes this chapter with a reading of Roy’s allegorical spirit of “History” through its relationship to the allegory of the Love Laws on Un/Touchability, thus unifying all elements of Roy’s counter-Indutva tropology. While the rhetoric of History suggests an allusion to Hegel, it is reinvented in the novel to articulate a trans-historical idea of Indianness, one that also provincializes the authority of Hinduism (i.e., “Purusa-Sukta”, Manu, and other Sanskritic ideologies of caste) in imagining the origins of Un/Touchability. This section also returns to the discourse of Velutha’s agency and offers a vernacular interpretation of his last utterance – “Naaley” – as a prophetic utterance through which Roy enunciates a counter-Indutva possibility for resistance to the violence of Indianness.

4.1 Roy’s Dual-rhetoric of Caste

The God of Small Things is often noted for its narratological emphasis on its characters’ personal stories. For some critics, the significance of these “Small” micro-narratives lies in their contrast with “Bigger” forms of discourse and power within and beyond the novel’s fictional universe. Sheena Patchay sums up the details of this contrast:

> By intricately interweaving the “small things” (the histories of the characters and the “unofficial” events of what transpires on the fateful day Sophie Mol drowns) with the “large things” (the submerged histories of the caste system and the officially documented version of what happened), the novel uses the personal (small things) to challenge the political (large things). (146)
The dynamics of the Small and the Big thus recall the dynamics of the classic feminist adage, *the personal is the political*, validating the realm of the former as a tool for resistance to the latter. Pranav Jani offers a similar interpretation by arguing that the strength of Roy’s novel lies specifically in her use of Small, personal histories as a means of validating the groups they represent, especially Untouchable characters like Velutha. For Jani, this focus on “subaltern” voices is what distinguishes *The God of Small Things* from other “postcolonial” novels that similarly use “postmodern aesthetics (multivocal texts, nonlinear narratives, magical realism)” with less political objectives (49). Thus, Jani writes, “this novel is not simply about the power of storytelling in the abstract, but the power of telling the stories of the small, the oppressed subalterns” (54). The significance of these Small, personal, and often silenced stories is further extrapolated in Anuradha Dingwaney Needham’s inter-textual reading of *The God of Small Things* as a fictional analogue to the “critical historiography” of the Subaltern Studies group and the work of historian Ranajit Guha in particular. As Needham explains, Guha’s concept of “critical historiography” was theoretically developed for the purposes of highlighting the “traces of subaltern life” that have been otherwise obscured in the official discourses of Indian state history, not to mention within all modern contexts, including colonial, nationalist, and Marxist historiography (qtd. in Needham 371). In her comparison of subalternist discourses within Guha and Roy, Needham concludes: “In locating the ‘small voices’ of the novel in Ammu, her twins, and Velutha, thereby making them (potentially) bearers of a [sic] alternative knowledge, way of being in the world, and form of community, Roy is involved in a similar project to Guha’s” (378).

Within the contexts of critical theory and leftist activism, these Small, personal, and often subaltern stories have actually turned out to be the “Big” points of focus for many of Roy’s scholarly readers. While I would include myself in this community of scholars concerned with “Small” interests, I am going to begin my discussion of the novel by

77 It is interesting that Guha shares Roy’s rhetoric of Big and Small in his discussion of elite and subaltern discourses. These ideas are partly developed in an article titled “The Small Voice of History” (1994) and were developed before the publication of Roy’s novel. Yet, there does not appear to be any evidence in Needham’s article or any other work of scholarship that confirms the direct influence of Guha’s text on Roy’s fiction.
highlighting an even smaller, yet equally significant, aspect within the novel’s collection of personal histories: the information they provide on a character’s professional history, subaltern or otherwise. In many cases, the small details about a character’s career, employment, or labour open up a rhetorical frame for the larger discourse of his or her individual history and more importantly, their caste subjectivity. If feminism argues that the political is the personal, Roy’s novel opens with a perspective on how the personal is the professional – not as an ideal, but as an everyday discursive reality for her characters.

In the case of the Ipe family, the legend of their founding patriarch is largely centered around his legendary reputation as “Punyan Kunju – Little Blessed One” – a name based on his childhood encounter with the head of the Syrian Christian Church (23). However, it should be noted that the narration of this episode begins with a reference to his vocational title: “Reverend E. John Ipe… a priest of the Mar Thoma church” (23). Roy’s rhetoric of vocation is similarly central to the personal histories of Pappachi and Mammachi, and in ways that strike an intersection between the two characters’ personal lives. The former is introduced through his failures as an “Imperial Entomologist” during the later decades of British rule (47). His retirement then follows with Mammachi’s entrepreneurial pursuit of Paradise Pickles & Preserves and this happens to be the point where her personal history commences: “Mammachi had started making pickles commercially soon after Pappachi retired from Government service in Delhi and came to live in Ayemenem” (47). The rhetoric of vocation is also used for Comrade K. N. M. Pillai and his son, Lenin. The senior Pillai enters the narrative through dual references to his leadership in the Communist Party and his administration of the “Lucky Press” printing house through which he publishes documents for the Party (15). A few lines later, the junior Pillai is introduced as “a service contractor for foreign embassies” in Delhi (15). Arguably, the most interesting cases are of Ammu’s ex-husband and her former father-in-law. The two men are first introduced as descendants of “once-wealthy zamindars” (39). Later on, we learn that the father, like Pillai, carried the double-life of being both the “Chairman of the Railway Board” and the “Secretary of BABA – the Bengal Amateur Boxing Association” (39). The son is a less accomplished “assistant manager of a tea estate” in Assam (39). The interesting part here is the element of anonymity; the two characters are never named and their presence is marginal throughout
the remainder of the novel, but for some reason the details of their professional life remain conspicuous.

To some extent, these and other such cases of vocational rhetoric allow for a comparison with other works of modern South Asian literature, particularly novels that deal with the everyday life of villages and other such small-town settings, where one’s professional history is generally treated as a matter of local and intimate knowledge. One good point of comparison is Raja Rao’s Kanthapura. His female narrator presents a slightly different case of vocational rhetoric in the first chapter: “‘Til now I’ve only spoken of the Brahmin quarter. Our village had a Pariah quarter too, a Potters’ quarter, a Weavers’ quarter and a Sudra quarter” (5). Where Roy refers to one’s profession as a point of entry for her characters’ personal history, Rao’s female narrator employs the same rhetoric for the purpose of delivering an oral geography. She highlights a clear relationship between occupation and identity, except here the focus is on the identities of communities rather than individual beings. Ultimately, the most obvious point about these references to vocation is that they serve as markers of each community’s caste identity: that is, caste as jati rather than as varna, though there is some overlap in terms like “Brahmin” and “Sudra” for those particular quarters of Rao’s fictional village.⁷⁸

Returning to The God of Small Things, it goes without saying that caste is a major concern for the characters of Ayemenem and particularly so given the plot surrounding Ammu and Velutha’s love affair. The question, then, is why does the narrator choose to be silent on the caste identities of characters such as those of the Ipe or the Pillai family? Why is she so explicit in identifying their occupational history, but reluctant to use similar signifiers for their jati?

One possible answer might be found in the critical perspectives provided by social scientist M. S. S. Pandian in “One Step Outside of Modernity: Caste, Identity, Politics and Public Sphere”. Pandian suggests that the tendency to silence one’s own caste

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⁷⁸ It is also worth noting that while the term “quarter” suggests a four-fold chaturvarnic scheme, the number of jatis here are in excess.
identity is a common rhetorical strategy in the autobiographies of upper-caste Indian writers. He does not discuss this technically as a matter of rhetoric per se, but the issues of language, narrative, and persuasiveness are nevertheless in the foreground of his theoretical discourse on transcoding caste identities.

As Pandian explains, “Caste always belongs to someone else; it is somewhere else; it is of another time. The act of transcoding is an act of acknowledging and disavowing caste at once” (6). Interestingly enough, Pandian’s concept of transcoding is situated as a response to R. K. Narayan’s memoir, My Days. One of the passages he scrutinizes centers around the problem of cooking meat for the family dog: “Sheba, our huge Great Dane, had to have her meat cooked, without the fumes from the meat pot polluting our strictly vegetarian atmosphere… [We needed] a place for our old servant too, who was the only one who could go out and get the mutton and cook it” (my italics Narayan qtd. in Pandian 6). Narayan makes no mention of his or his servant’s caste identities. Instead, the emphasis is on his family’s anxiety around the issue of pollution and in ways that echo Chapter Two’s discussion of Godbole’s purist, Brahminical sensibilities in A Passage to India. The issue of caste is thus transcoded as it becomes something else (pollution), displaced somewhere else (outside the house), and viewed as someone else’s problem (servant and dog). Ultimately, the silencing of caste and the overemphasis on custom deflects the reader’s attention away from the politics of social inequality.

For Pandian, the rhetoric of caste is radically different in the autobiographies of Dalit and other lower-caste writers. He argues, “we have here two competing sets of languages dealing with the issue of caste. One talks of caste by other means; and the other talks of caste on its ‘own terms’” (6-7). He adds that for writers like Bhamma, Viramma, Vasant Moon, and Arjun Dangle, the issue of caste identity is explicit and never treated as a self-enclosed concept. As a result, caste means nothing in itself. Instead, it is understood as “a relational identity” within a social structure of power dynamics, rather than a de-politicized system of religious beliefs, ritual practices, or ethnic identity (6).

In between these two modes of rhetoric, Roy’s novel occupies a unique position. It is common knowledge that The God of Small Things contains elements of autobiography.
Like Rahel, Roy was born into an upper-caste, Syrian Christian family. Thus, at the level of her own religious and social identity, she is arguably an upper-caste writer. She also avoids clear references to the jati identities of her upper-caste characters. However, there is a shift in Roy’s style when her narrative turns to the personal histories of lower-caste characters like Velutha and Vellya Paapen. She is not only explicit on the subject of their caste identity, but she is also interested in playing and subverting these modes of upper- and lower-caste rhetoric. She writes,

Velutha wasn’t supposed to be a carpenter.

He was called Velutha – which means White in Malayalam – because he was so black. His father, Vellya Paapen, was a Paravan. A toddy tapper. He had a glass eye. He had been shaping a block of granite with a hammer when a chip flew into his left eye and sliced right through it. (my italics 70)

The passage opens with a coincidental reference to Velutha’s occupation and closes with a key event in his father’s life, one that might be interpreted as the result of a work-related injury; both of these descriptions are consistent with the personal histories of the Ipes and the Pillais. However, it is in the middle section of the passage that this rhetoric of vocation is supplemented with one of jati: “Paravan.” This arguably marks an important rhetorical moment within the narrative: caste here is neither silenced nor transcoded; it is explicit and conspicuous. None of the other characters in the novel are subject to a similar dual-rhetoric of vocation and jati, but that does not mean that the other characters are literally casteless. Instead, the lack of such details highlights a relational contrast between those who are caste-ed conspicuously and those for whom caste identity is rhetorically invisible and therefore a matter of social privilege. 79

This sense of upper-caste privilege and power is also foregrounded above through Roy’s references to other interlocking systems of social inequity – class (“toddy tapper”) and

79 The relational dynamic can also be read critically as an inversion of the varnic paradigm. In Vedic literature, the “Untouchables” are defined as so partly because they exist outside the four-fold hierarchy of ritual groups. They lack varna, which literally means that they lack “colour” and therefore ritual status. By contrast, in Roy, the Untouchable Paravans are the only ones signified with jati, which is doubly a sign of visibility and conspicuity, not privilege.
racism ("he was so black"). Velutha is the only Indian character that is introduced on the basis of his skin colour, but it is probably a stretch to argue that race is therefore the basis of casteism in the novel – a grand narrative of nineteenth-century colonial Indology. It is also evident that Roy’s descriptions of Paravan life are not strongly grounded in an anthropological approach to the various rituals and customs around eating, marriage, or even occupation for this particular jati. The passage above suggests an association with toddy tapping, but there is no evidence within the novel to conclude that this is specific to Velutha’s jati, and the scholarship on the novel has not helped either as most critics have approached Roy’s representation of caste without engaging anthropological studies of the Paravan community. The reading in this chapter does not rectify this problem, but that is because the analysis of caste here is mostly with regard to the rhetorical, tropological, and allegorical dimensions of its power dynamics, and jati is merely the starting point for this discussion.

The power dynamics of caste are more fully developed in the novel through the rhetorical relationship between jati and the language of Untouchable and Touchable. This relationship is illustrated in the exchanges between Baby Kochamma and Inspector Thomas Mathew when the controversy over Velutha and Ammu’s affair is brought to fore: “She told Inspector Thomas Mathew of the circumstances that had led to the sudden dismissal of a factory worker. A Paravan. A few days ago he tried to, to… force himself on her niece, she said” (254). The rhetorical emphasis on jati suggests an attempt on Baby Kochamma’s part to make that aspect of Velutha’s caste identity conspicuous; it also makes her case more persuasive before the Inspector. Yet, while the reference to caste appears to be explicit, it is also subject to a unique form of transcoding where jati is acknowledged by the addresser but then translated through a different rhetoric of caste in

80 One exception of an engagement with jati is in Kanaganayakam’s reading: “it is no accident that, while Velutha’s family belongs to the Paravan caste, the constant reference is to fishing rather than the occupation associated with the caste” (2004 147). The bigger problem with this issue is that there are variations on the spelling of “Paravan” as “Paraiyan” and “Parayan” in the most recent “List of Communities” from the Anthropological Survey of India (published online by the government of India’s Ministry of Culture). “Parayan” is also the name Roy uses to describe her personal experience with casteism in her 2014 introduction to Ambedkar’s Annihilation of Caste (para 1.) This almost suggests that her rhetoric of “Paravan” in The God of Small Things may have a semi-fictional basis.
the mind of the addressee: “Inspector Thomas Mathew, receding behind his bristling Air India mustache, understood perfectly. He had a Touchable wife, two Touchable daughters – whole Touchable generations waiting in their Touchable wombs…” (245). The repetition of “Touchable” is excessive and consequently used as a point of satire as it illustrates and mocks the Inspector’s sense of upper-caste anxiety. However, its greater significance is that it generates an important point of contrast with the rhetoric of “Paravan” in Kochamma. This contrast is then reproduced a few lines later and in a more concise form when the narrator describes the Inspector’s retrospective thoughts on Velutha’s arrest and subsequent death: “when the real story reached Inspector Thomas Mathew, the fact that what the Paravan had taken from the Touchable Kingdom had not been snatched, but given, concerned him deeply” (246). As with the previous example, the term “Untouchable” is missing in this contrast between “Paravan” and “Touchable.” Some might argue that the terms “Paravan” and “Untouchable” are synonymous or interchangeable, and while this is plausible to an extent, one has to be careful with conflating different rhetorical systems of caste, as is the case whenever anyone has conflated jati with varna. In Roy’s novel, it is erroneous to blindly interpret “Touchable” as a substitute for “Brahmin” or any other upper-caste varnic identity. The terms “Touchable” and “Untouchable” belong to a separate order of rhetoric, one that is fictional despite a few signs of its similarities with the religious, cultural, and political dynamics of varna.

As discussed in sections 1.2 and 1.3, the rhetoric of varna is used to centripetally absorb, translate, classify, and subject a jati to one of four (if not five) key categories of purity and pollution. The same logic of centripetality and subjection is present in Roy’s dual-rhetoric of jati and Un/Touchability. This is illustrated in two historical cases of religious conversion within the novel’s Keralan setting. The first of these is set during the colonial period. The narrator explains,

When the British came to Malabar, a number of Paravans, Pelayas and Pulayas (among them Velutha’s grandfather, Kelan) converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican Church to escape the scourge of Untouchability. As added incentive they were given a little food and money. They were known as the Rice-Christians. It didn’t take them long to realize that they had jumped from the frying pan into
the fire. They were made to have separate churches, with separate services, and separate priests. As a special favour they were even given their own separate Pariah Bishop. (my italics 71)

The Paravans, Pelayas, and Pulayas succeeded in “escaping” Hinduism and found a new communal home in the Anglican church, only to find themselves “separated” along the semi-invisible lines of caste. The significance of jati differences are also dissolved through this experience of conversion: the Paravans, Pelayas, and Pulayas become unified, subsumed and re-marginalized as “Untouchables”, and the latter is arguably signified under the prefix of “Rice-”.

Such forms of epistemic violence – of forcibly rewriting the identities of individuals and slotting them into fixed subjectivities – has its parallels in Roy’s narrative on Syrian Christian conversion during the early decades of the first millennium. She writes, “Twenty percent of Kerala’s population were Syrian Christians who believed that they were descendants of the one hundred Brahmins whom St. Thomas the Apostle converted to Christianity when he traveled East after the Resurrection” (64). If conversion proved to be a futile exercise for the Paravans, Pelayas and Pulayas, it is paradoxically one that preserves the Syrian Christians’ sense of privilege – that is, as former Brahmins and more importantly, as perennial Touchables. Thus, in both cases, the attempt at religious conversion serves only to re-inscribe the trace of one’s caste identity – that is, of their Un/Touchable subjectivity – a trace which Rao’s protagonist in The Serpent and the Rope would reclaim as a trace of Indianness, given his analogue on the re-absorption of early Buddhist converts as communities to be “treated as a separate caste” (339).

In his reading of religion, caste, and conversion in The God of Small Things, Chelva Kanaganayakam states, “Christianity never really managed to transcend caste” (my italics 2004 144). In the context of an Indutva study, this conclusion could also be reinterpreted in a positivist light: caste is always transcendent to religious identity in Roy’s vision of imagined Indianness. This pattern of transcendence is doubly marked as a reproduction of previous subjectivities: Touchable and Untouchable Christians. The Indutva narratives of Forster and Rao highlight similar patterns of transcendence, particularly in terms of
centripetality and dual-rhetoricity. In both Passage and Serpent, the transcendence of varna over religion and jati also enables other allegorical narratives of transcendence: the Spiritual triumphing over the Material; the guru disciplining the “poetic” deviant; and ultimately, the spirit of Indianness contesting, if not triumphing over, the sovereignty of History’s various regimes (i.e., colonial rule, postcolonial nationalism, and global capitalism). None of these narratives could have been imagined by Forster or Rao through the singular rhetoric of jati alone. The latter carries significance at the literal level of occupation, kinship, and community; it is, as many sociologists have argued, the sign by which caste is understood and practiced in everyday Indian life. By contrast, varna is not literal, but figurative, and thus it registers a sublime notion of caste, one that suits the allegorical dimensions of these novels well.

Roy’s rhetoric of Un/Touchability is similarly rooted in figurative language. It is also used to register a sublime perception of caste, one that is produced through the transcendence of jati as well as religion. However, unlike varna, the rhetoric of Un/Touchability has its origins within Roy’s literary imagination, rather than in Hindu mythology or other such non-fictional aspects of religious tradition. This point has to be stressed because it is overlooked by scholars who seek a culturally authoritative referent for caste within the mythologies of the Vedas or the legal codes of Manu. The argument of this chapter is based on the view that Roy invents her own rhetoric of caste-as-Un/Touchability in order to narrate an equally fictional set of mythologies, legal codes, and metaphysics – the totality of which is integral to her counter-Indutva critique of civilizational Indianness.

The most obvious point of comparison between the rhetoric of varna and Un/Touchability is structural. Chaturvarna is a four-fold hierarchy, whereas Roy’s rhetoric of Un/Touchability is used to imagine a binary set of differences without any room for positions of in-betweenness. This sense of epistemological rigidity is doubly a

81 Alex Tickell writes, “[i]n Roy’s novel, references to the ‘Love Laws’ which ‘lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much.’… can be associated most clearly with the regulation of inter-caste marriage in the Manusmriti” (24). I have also seen this association made less formally by scholars at conferences.
point of distinction with the sociological discourse on varna and its relationship to jati. To reiterate M. N. Srinivas’s argument, “the caste system always permitted a certain amount of mobility” and especially for those jati groups who wish to improve their social status by Sanskritizing their community “within the middle regions of the [varnic] hierarchy” (1970 8). By representing caste through a binary dualism, Roy’s novel omits both the relative heterogeneity of varna as well as the historical and realist possibility of mobility. Instead, as illustrated in the case of the Rice-Christians and the formerly Brahmin Syrian Christians, Un/Touchability is a mode of immobile subjectivity. This is not what caste literally is, but how it is imagined within the novel.

Some might argue that the binary rhetoric of Un/Touchability can or should be interpreted more generally according to the two extremes of varnic epistemology: Brahmin Touchables and Shudra/Dalit Untouchables. This concurs with Srinivas’ admission that “[o]nly in the case of the Untouchable has Sanskritization failed to raise their status” (154). However, this varnic interpretation of Roy’s Un/Touchable rhetoric overlooks the ritual contexts of varna, where identities are inscribed according to varying degrees of purity and pollution; it also detaches varna from the metaphysical logic of varnashramadharma in Neo-Vedantic thought: varnic stability as a fulfillment of collective dharma, an evocation of brahman-ical oneness, and an earthly mimesis of cosmic order (rta). While a discourse of pollution is integral to Roy’s rhetoric of Un/Touchability, the grand narrative of varnashramadharma is never evoked in Roy’s novel; the discourse of “purity” is also of minimal significance to the novel. The rhetoric of Un/Touchability is thus a parody, a strategically incomplete imitation, of a varnic style.

Many of Roy’s scholarly readers have sought to demonstrate her treatment of caste in relationship to other forms of social, political, economic, and environmental violence. However, what virtually all of them have overlooked is the possibility of a metaphysical basis for her various critiques. Thus, while her rhetoric of Un/Touchability departs from a varnic style, it is grounded in its own grand narrative of fictional first principles. This is another point of commonality between her novel and the Indutva narratives of Forster,
Rao, and Coomaraswamy. The first of such grand narratives is to be found in “the Love Laws.” The latter is introduced in the closing passage of Roy’s first chapter:

… it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how.

And how much. (33)

It is too easy to read the Love Laws as a metaphor for the legal codes of *Manu* or any other such “Hindu” text. As with the rhetoric of Un/Touchability, it makes more sense to read the Love Laws for their fictionality, rather than their cultural, religious, or historical authenticity. These Laws are invoked in the passage above as both a cause and origin for all of the troubles and tragedies narrated in the novel. The notion of the Love Laws as a first principle thus inscribes it with a quality that is metaphysical as well as allegorical. The fact that the very concept of the Love Laws has no literal basis in science, philosophy, or cultural history marks it as a myth and perhaps one without a stable referent. Having said that, one method of decoding this myth is by simply substituting “touch” for “love”: *the laws that lay down who could be touched, and how.*

This is admittedly a subjective interpretation, but it enables a chain of fictional logic that supports this reading of the novel: i.e., the Love Laws as a fictional myth for a fictional metaphysic, both of which are grounded in Roy’s fictional rhetoric for an equally fictional epistemology of caste, religion, and civilizational Indianness. If one insists on the authenticity of the Love Laws as a metaphor for *Manu* or another such referent, then one is also inclined to believe that Roy’s rhetoric of Un/Touchability and her larger narrative of Indianness here are historical and realist, rather than self-consciously allegorical (as is the case of Forster and Rao’s Indutva narratives).

Having distinguished the rhetoric of Un/Touchability from a Neo-Vedantic, *varnic* style, the next section will focus on Roy’s treatment of Un/Touchability as a mode of subjectivity that takes the body as its primary site of violence as well as resistance. This section will also focus specifically on the contrasts between Velutha and his father Vellya Paapen as two key symbols of Untouchable subjectivity: the former as the insolent Untouchable body, and the latter as the submissive, disciplined, and grateful Untouchable “soul”.
4.2 Grateful Souls and Insolent Bodies

The contrast between Velutha and his father is initially highlighted in the novel as a matter of inter-generational differences. Vellya Paapen is described as an “Old-World Paravan” who had lived, suffered, and witnessed the experiences of being an Untouchable during the “Crawling Backwards Days” (73). The experiences of the latter are summarized in the novel, albeit from a Touchable perspective:

Mammachi told Estha and Rahel that she could remember a time, in her girlhood, when Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan’s footprints. In Mammachi’s time, Paravans, like other Untouchables, were not allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed. (71)

The passage illustrates various acts performed by Untouchables according to the prohibitions and expectations enforced by dominant Touchable society. To some extent, these details also evoke Spivak’s theory of subaltern subjectivity, specifically that which is discussed in the essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” While subaltern subjectivity can be generally understood as a position of extreme social, economic, and political marginalization, Spivak theorizes it uniquely in her essay as a form of “epistemic violence” (2010 36). For her, this violence occurs whenever a marginalized individual or group is “trying to, but not succeeding in being heard” and thus the voice of the subaltern is marked by silence, muted speech, and the erasure of discourse (“In Response” 22). Such modes of subaltern subjectivity are arguably illustrated above in Roy’s depiction of the Crawling Backwards Days: the sweeping away of footprints and the act of speaking with a hand over one’s mouth.

The interpretation of Roy’s Untouchables as figures of subaltern subjectivity is not uncommon in the scholarship on The God of Small Things (Almeida; Comfort; Froula; Ganguly; Jani; Li 2009; Needham; and Tickell), but the focus of this dissertation’s study
of the novel is of a slightly different, though related, mode of subjectivity, particularly for the case of Vellya Paapen and other Untouchables of the Crawling Backward Days. For the latter, their oppression goes beyond the loss of power through the appropriation of voice. Rather, the passage above describes their “success” in meeting Touchable expectations. These expectations are partly, if not largely, met through the Untouchables’ own desire and willingness to participate in their own oppression. This is not to absolve the Touchables as agents of Untouchable oppression. Rather, it is to theoretically distinguish Vellya Paapen and other Untouchables of his generation as disciplined souls.

The term “discipline” is loosely derived from the rhetoric of Foucault’s work in Discipline and Punish and his discussion of various institutional methods, instruments, and technologies that have been historically used to produce “‘docile’ bodies” by disassociating “power from the body” and transforming it into expressions of “aptitude.” Foucault also plays with the rhetoric of the “soul” in Discipline as a term for the subjectivity of the disciplined individual and his or her subjection to “the prison of the body” (30). Such rhetoric is useful to a reading of Vellya Paapen and other Untouchables of the Crawling Backwards Days who are similarly imprisoned in the discipline of their own bodies: i.e., the discipline of crawling backwards; bending over; covering the mouth when speaking; leaving the upper body uncovered when seen in public; etc. In all such cases, the Untouchable body appears to have been disciplined to avoid contacting, touching, and therefore polluting the Touchables. This is also to say that the Untouchables of the Crawling Backwards Days have been disciplined so as to uphold the sovereignty of the Love Laws.

Interestingly, Roy’s micro-narrative offers no descriptions of Untouchables from this generation resisting, protesting, or rising up against the Touchable hegemony and by the same token, there are no references to Untouchable torture, be it publicly or privately, during the age of the Crawling Backwards Days. This does not necessarily mean that such acts of resistance or punishment never took place during that era. Rather, such absences serve the rhetorical function of foregrounding the Untouchable’s desire to be disciplined – that is, to respect Touchable taboos and prohibitions, to meet and fulfill their expectations, and consequently escape the possibility of punishment – as a mode of
subjectivity. This sense of desire and discipline is best illustrated in the actions, subjectivity, and ultimately the “soul” of Vellya Paapen.

As readers, we are repeatedly informed that Vellya Paapen was an Old World Paravan who had lived and seen the Crawling Backwards Days. Although those Days are supposedly gone, Vellya Paapen remains “a good safe, Paravan” (197). He never protests and he is consequently never punished. Instead, he is depicted as a participant in both his own discipline and his son’s punishment. Although it is difficult to find a single cause or agent in the event of Velutha’s death, the role played by Vellya Paapen is significant because it illustrates the depths to which an Untouchable body can be disciplined and in ways that go beyond skin and muscle to involve the interpellation of an Untouchable’s voice, emotions, perceptions, and worldview.

Vellya Paapen performs his role in the History House episode during the course of a brief, yet dramatic, exchange with Mammachi and Baby Kochamma. Although his contributions to the episode are primarily with regards to the content of his words (i.e., an announcement of Velutha and Ammu’s affair), it is through his physical gestures that the motives behind this performance – that is, a performance of his bodily, disciplined Untouchable subjectivity – are revealed: “Vellya Paapen began to cry. Half of him wept. Tears welled up in his real eye and shone on his black cheek. With his other eye he stared stonily ahead. An old Paravan, who had seen the Walking Backwards days, torn between Loyalty and Love” (242). Vellya Paapen’s “other eye” is made of glass; it was gifted to him by the Ipe family as a replacement for the one that was injured in a work-related accident. While the literal significance of this glass eye is cosmetic, it also carries

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82 This quotation actually comes from the description of Vellya Paapen’s other son, Kuttapen. He is a “good, safe Paravan” because his body has been paralyzed through his vocational experience as a toddy-tapper. This disability prevents him from working in the fields, but it does not fully succeed in silencing him. The narrator explains: “On bad days the orange walls held hands and bent over him, inspecting him like malevolent doctors, slowly deliberately, squeezing the breath out of him and making him scream. Sometimes they receded of their own accord, and the room he lay in grew impossibly large, terrorizing him with the specter of his own insignificance. That too made him cry out” (197). These cries and screams are devoid of language, but they are nevertheless significant as sounds emitted by a body in defiance of death, despite disability and discipline. In the larger context of this section, Kuttapen thus represents a figure of in-betweenness, positioned in between the modes of subjectivity represented by his father and brother.
figurative significance here as an instrument of bodily discipline given Vellya Paapen’s deep-seated awkwardness of being dependent, yet disconnected, with this particular object that has been so intimately placed within his body: “he felt that his eye was not his own” (73). In his exchange with Mammachi, this discomfort is resonant as a discomfort with his own self as the father of an inter-caste transgressor. While Vellya Paapen attempts to persuade Mammachi with the rhetoric of having witnessed Velutha and Ammu “with his own eye”, it could also be said that he saw them figuratively through the lens of the glass replacement, a lens inscribed with the Touchables’ belief in the sovereignty of the Love Laws (242). Having internalized that worldview, Vellya Paapen then allows his body to voice it through his announcement. This act of symbolic ventriloquism goes beyond its verbal content. Its primary sign is in the tears that flow from Vellya Paapen’s real eye and which consequently signify the degree to which his body has been disciplined to speak, perform, and feel according to what he believes are Touchable expectations.

What kinds of social conditions could ever make it possible for a person – an Old World Paravan and a father – to be disciplined to perform such an extreme sense of subjection, desire, and loyalty? The answer is to be found in the origins of Vellya Paapen’s glass eye:

He had seen the Crawling Backwards Days and his gratitude to Mammachi was as wide and deep as a river in spate. When he had his accident with the stone chip, Mammachi organized and paid for his glass eye… his gratitude widened his smile and bent his back. (my italics 73)

According to this piece of both personal and professional history, Vellya Paapen’s subjection is a causal product of his “gratitude.” His gratitude also carries a series of bodily effects – bending his back is merely among the first. His gratitude is doubly significant as a rhetorical device that Vellya Paapen deploys in his “loyalty” performance. Having failed to persuade Mammachi with the symbolic offering of his glass eye, Vellya Paapen prefaces his announcement of Ammu and Velutha’s affair in a manner that couches his gratitude in a panegyric mode:
He started by recounting how much her family had done for his. Generation for generation. How, long before the Communists thought of it, Reverend E. John Ipe had given his father, Kelan, title to the land on which their hut now stood. How Mammachi had paid for his eye. How she had organized for Velutha to be educated and given him a job… (241-2)

Using the rhetoric of Foucault, Vellya Paapen’s ventriloquized gratitude can be read ontologically as an expression of his “soul”. Gratitude as such makes up the figurative prison of his body, and it is a prison that has been doubly locked by his ever-widening “smile”.

As an Untouchable of the post-Crawling Backwards generation, Velutha represents a physical as well as ontological reversal of his father’s experience. Where Vellya Paapen performs as a grateful soul, disciplined and committed to meeting Touchable expectations, Velutha’s body is subject to punishment, but it nevertheless refuses to embody a similar position of gratitude. His body is never imprisoned to the degree that his father’s is, and his voice is never ventriloquized, not even when he is tortured and jailed by the Touchable police officers. He is characterized by silence throughout the novel, but this lack of expression can be re-read as something other than disempowered forms of subaltern silence. For example, in the History House episode,

his skull was fractured in three places. His nose and both his cheekbones were smashed, leaving his face pulpy, undefined. The blow to his mouth had slit open his upper lip and broken six teeth, three of which were embedded in his lower lip, hideously inverting his brilliant smile… (294)

One might read the image of Velutha’s inverted smile as a form of writing on the body and consequently a silencing of the voice. Sandra Regina Goulart Almeida’s treatment of the History House episode is in line with this interpretation: “Since torture has the power to destroy language, through the violence scene until his death in the next episode, Velutha remains mute and vacant, completely absent from the narrative and the official version of history that is released afterwards” (267). In another instance, Almeida makes her point with a stronger emphasis on bodily subjectivity: “this Untouchable body of the
subaltern is completely swept away, erased from hegemonic accounts, and from the
“Official Version”” (266). However, I argue that Velutha’s silence here is ambiguous
enough to be read as a response to his punishment. An inverted smile may have been
carved into his face and such gruesome acts may succeed in destroying his capacity for
verbal expression, but they do not take away Velutha’s agency to withhold his own voice.
The Untouchable subaltern does not speak here, but Untouchable forms of speech can
also function as forms of repression and disempowerment, as is evident in the acts of
ventriloquism that Vellya Paapen subjects himself to throughout the novel. By contrast,
Velutha’s silences are signs of an undisciplined body and therefore a resistant
Untouchable.

The punishment that Velutha is subjected to in the History House episode is something
that no other character experiences in the novel, including his father and the other
Untouchables of the Crawling Backwards Days. Yet, it is also evident there is no other
character in the novel that enjoys the same level of undisciplined, bodily freedom. Unlike
his father, Velutha almost never performs anything that is expected of him as an
Untouchable subject. This attitude of refusal is demonstrated in his non-\textit{jati} pursuit of
carpentry, his Naxalite activism, and his inter-caste affair with Ammu. His lack of
discipline is also evident in ‘smaller’ instances of bodily pleasure, such as when he is
fishing for food, sleeping outdoors and swimming without a \textit{mundu}. The latter of these is
given a particularly strong emphasis in the chapter titled “The Crossing.” Although the
structure of this chapter appears to function as a two-page prelude to the horrors of the
History House episode, its representations of Velutha in all of his nakedness serves to
reiterate the point that Velutha has never been a prisoner of his body. In fact, he is at the
height of his freedom in the final hours before his tragic death.

83 While Ammu expresses a similar defiant attitude, there is a part of her that is arguably disciplined when
she decides to return Estha to his father in order to make a “man” out of him. Her acceptance of normative
gender expectations is conveyed through her italicized thoughts: “Maybe they’re right... Maybe a boy does
\textit{need a Baba}” (286). It is also interesting that this shift takes place at least immediately after her humiliating
encounter with Inspector Mathew, where he gently strikes her breasts with a baton and casually insults her
as a “\textit{veshya}” (prostitute) (9). Although the use of the baton is said to be “gentle”, it is arguably intended as
a disciplinary gesture, and one that is directly aimed at the body. (9)
In his critique of subalternist criticism, Victor Li questions the representation and scholarly reception of Velutha as a tragic hero, whose death enables a utopian ideality for notions of “subaltern resistance and alterity” (291). Li explains,

the subaltern has to die in order to serve as an irreducible idea. In death, the subaltern is perfected as a concept so pure no living referent can contradict or complicate it. As in utopian thinking, it is the subaltern’s non-existence that ensures the possibility of its conceptualization as a critical alternative to existing hegemonies. (my italics 276)

I agree with Li to the extent that Velutha’s significance as a subaltern hero is dependent on his death. Velutha would lose his significance as a figure of pure alterity had Roy written his story as a survivor. It is also true that even though the tragedy of Velutha’s story is given voice in Roy’s novel, this act of mere expression is not powerful enough to destroy the caste system or any other such forces of Indianness. Pranav Jani echoes this view: “while small stories can and should be recovered, they are not sufficiently strong to withstand and magically overcome the extreme violence of the big” (55). Having said that, it is still possible to contemplate Velutha’s presence as an Untouchable whose actions symbolize resistance to the mode of disciplined Untouchable subjectivity embodied by his father. He does not succeed in overturning the order of things, but his desire for freedom nevertheless remains significant because it is articulated throughout the majority of the novel and not just on the eve of his death, let alone in death. In fact, while his mundu-less presence at “The Crossing” of the river may serve as a visual spectacle of this freedom, \(^84\) his commitment to it stems from his early youth. This is illustrated in the inter-generational tensions between Vellya Paapen and Velutha:

\(^84\) Drawing on Vinita Bhatnagar, Li also argues that the “aestheticization” of Velutha’s nude body is comparable to that of the “punka-wallah’s body in A Passage to India”, thus revealing both Roy and Forster’s ignorance of how “nakedness is a mark of social humiliation” within caste society (287). Bhatnagar is correct to point out that “men and women of the lowest castes were not allowed to wear clothing above the waist” – a point that Roy also makes in her overview of the Crawling Backwards Days – but the act of not wearing any clothes below the waist is arguably transgressive, permitted perhaps to sadhus, but not anyone within the novels’ representation of mainstream caste society (Bhatnagar qtd. in Li, 287-288).
Vellya Paapen feared for his younger son. He couldn’t say what it was that frightened him. It was nothing that he had said. Or done. It was not *what* he said, but the *way* he said it. Not *what* he did, but the *way* he did it.

Perhaps it was just a lack of hesitation. An unwarranted assurance. In the way he walked. The way he held his head. The quiet way he offered suggestions without being asked. Or the quiet way in which he disregarded suggestions without appearing to rebel.

While these were qualities that were perfectly acceptable, perhaps even desirable, in *Touchables*, Vellya Paapen thought that in a Paravan they could (and would, and indeed, *should*) be construed as insolence. (73)

If Vellya Paapen is an archetype for the grateful Untouchable soul, Velutha’s role in the novel is to represent the *insolent* Untouchable body. The former expresses the desire to be disciplined, and the latter signifies the desire to remain undisciplined at the individual level of both physical movement and self-expression. The fact that Vellya Paapen is unable to articulate or isolate the reasons why Velutha’s insolence causes him so much anxiety relates as much to the transgressive potential of the body as it does to the power of silence. Velutha’s silence is a sign of his own agency and especially in the context of the History House episode because it continues to serve as a point of contrast with his father’s gratitude. Velutha is beaten to death, but not for a moment is he represented with a single sign of having internalized the ideology of his torturers. His silence stays off the possibility of becoming a ventriloquized body and thus he remains an insolent body, even when dead.

Thus, while Velutha and Vellya Paapen may belong to different generations, their differences are neither temporal nor historical, but rather bodily and ontological. Vellya Paapen may have witnessed and lived through the “Crawling Backwards Days”, but his presence is paradigmatically that of a disciplined Untouchable – a grateful soul. Conversely, Velutha represents the figure of an insolent Untouchable body, one that remains undisciplined in the face of violence and death. Both characters function as two separate symbols of how Roy’s Untouchables respond to the metaphysics of power.
through which caste subjectivity is produced at the level of bodily as well as ontological being.

The next section of this chapter will turn to the other side of Roy’s treatment of caste by examining the construction of Touchable subjectivity. Again, as Pandian argues, caste is a relational concept, and one cannot talk about Untouchable subjectivity without discussing that of the Touchable. For characters in Roy’s novel, the construction of Touchable subjectivity is paradoxically dependent on an act of recognition from the Untouchable and it also pre-supposed by the Touchable perception of the Untouchable as an agent of pollution. The dynamics of this relationship will be examined partly through the lens of Frantz Fanon’s discourse on the construction of blackness as a mode of ontological non-being. This section will also go further to explore the intersection of the bodily and the ontological by looking at the role of touch in Untouchable-Touchable relations. Roy’s emphasis on touch is, I argue, a key factor in the novel’s discourse of caste pollution, yet it also distinguishes her rhetoric of Un/Touchability from the Vedic one of *varna* and ritual status that is otherwise central to Forster and Rao’s Indutva narratives.

### 4.3 Sacred Bodies and Polluted Hands

To open this discussion of Touchable subjectivity, let us return to the micro-narrative of Velutha’s personal history and his relationship with Ammu’s Touchable family:

> As a young boy, Velutha would come with Vellya Paapen to the back entrance of the Ayemenem House to deliver the coconuts they had plucked from the trees in the compound. Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched. Caste Hindus and Caste Christians. (70-1)

The passage illustrates what might be read as a custom practiced to prohibit the pollution of a Touchable space. It also illustrates the Untouchables’ observation for the custom and therefore represents another sign of their disciplined sensibility. Both father and son
fulfill the expectation that the prohibition will be upheld. What is arguably most interesting about this passage is the uniquely rhetorical manner in which it presents the closest thing to a definition for Untouchable subjectivity in the entire novel: “they were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched.” The Untouchable is defined solely on the basis of prohibition, taboo, and a lack of agency. We have already discussed some of these prohibitions as signs of discipline in the previous section, but they are worth reconsidering here through a rhetoric of touch and taboo: i.e., the taboo of Untouchable footprints touching Touchable soles and Touchable roads; the sight of male Untouchable chests touching Touchable eyes; and of Untouchable breath touching Touchable noses. In all such cases, the touch of the Untouchable represents an act of pollution, and therefore casts (as well as caste-s) the Untouchable as an agent of pollution.

The Untouchable’s personal or even jati identity is negated in order for he or she to be perceived as a pollutant. However, it can also be said that the Untouchable is ontologically deemed a pollutant only to the extent that this is how he or she is perceived. The narrator does not state this explicitly, but it is implied in the definition given above. Deconstructed further, this definition reveals that the construction of Touchable and Untouchable subjectivities is equally grounded in a chain of perception-based acts. The Touchable’s perception of the Untouchable as a pollutant is the presuppositional act within this chain. By internalizing this perspective, the Untouchable embraces the conditions of his or her subjectivity and avoids contact with all that is Touchable. In this way, he or she upholds the sovereignty of the Love Laws, and this serves to indicate the success of their discipline. That said, in order for the Untouchable to fulfill this set of expectations, they have to recognize which individuals and objects are Touchable and therefore taboo. Given the aforementioned definition, it is arguable that the Touchable is dependent on the Untouchable for this act of recognition. Without it, the Touchable has no subjectivity as a Touchable.

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85 Given this example, it seems that Velutha’s radical insolence is not only a marker of his difference from his father, but it also separates his lack of agency as a child from his reclamation of it as a young adult.
While these perception-based acts of mutual recognition and Touchable dependency bring to mind Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, this exegesis is more closely informed by Fanon’s engagement with Hegel in *Black Skin, White Masks*. In the chapter titled “The Fact of Blackness”, Fanon writes:

As long as the black man is among his own, he will have no occasion, except in minor conflicts, to experience his being through others. There is of course the moment of “being for others,” of which Hegel speaks, but every ontology is made unattainable in a colonized and civilized society… Ontology – once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside – does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some critics will take it on themselves to remind us that this proposition has a converse. I say this is false. The black man has no ontological resistance in *the eyes of the white man*. (my italics 109-110)

Fanon’s emphasis on being “black in relation to the white” echoes Pandian’s theory of relational identity in lower-caste autobiographies, but it also goes one step further in addressing this issue as an ontological problem – that is, a problem of negative ontology or rather, of non-being. The black subject exists solely as a “being for others” and more importantly, as a metaphysical catalyst for the recognition of others. The black subject lacks an ontology of “being for itself” and the concept of blackness is revealed to be otherwise meaningless in itself. As a result, the black subject’s functional mode of “being for others” is premised on its own non-being. That said, for Fanon, this state of non-being is a non-originary one; it is imposed by the white subject through a presuppositional act of perception and what Fanon otherwise refers to as the “gaze” (“the eyes of the white man”).

Roy’s definition of Untouchable identity is similarly grounded in a negative ontology. The Touchable depends on the Untouchable for recognition, but that recognition is itself contingent on the Touchable’s initial perception of the Untouchable as an agent of pollution. By internalizing the “fact” of this perception, the Untouchable becomes fixed
through the imposition of his or her own interstitial non-being: caught between being-through-the-perception-of-others and as being-for-the-recognition-of-others.

As Fanon illustrates through moments of semi-fictional, confessional narrative, this mode of negative ontology is the result of a scenario that begins with the gaze and closes with the body, only to enclose it as a site of non-being. He writes,

And then the occasion arose when I had to meet the white man’s eyes. An unfamiliar weight burdened me. The real world challenged my claims. In the white world the man of color encounters difficulty in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negative activity. (110)

This exchange between white eyes and black bodies is restaged later in a more graphic manner of a medical operation theatre. Fanon writes:

I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am fixed. Having adjusted their microtomes, they objectively cut away slices of my reality. I am laid bare. I feel, I see in those white faces that it is not a new man who has come in, but a new kind of man, a new genus. Why, it’s a Negro! (116)

Drawing on the previous section’s discussion of discipline, the non-being of Fanon’s “Negro” might be read as a “soul” that imprisons the body of the colonized, racialized subject. However, Fanon’s rhetoric is more medical than theological, as is evident in the surgical cuts made figuratively above. As a result, what completes this operation scenario is not a soul but a “seal” of subjectivity:

I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.

Sealed into that crushing objecthood, I turned to others. (my italics 109)

Thus, by “sealing” the black body as a subject of non-being, the body becomes an object, a thing denied of agency.
Although Roy’s novel does not offer a parallel scenario of metamorphosis, a similar dynamic is suggested, though with a slight variation where both Untouchable and Touchable bodies are equally, though differently, sealed into their subjectivities. One instance is in the tableau-like image of Velutha and Ammu as children: “He could make intricate toys… He would bring them for Ammu, holding them out on his palm (as he had been taught) so she wouldn’t have to touch them” (72). The gesture Velutha makes with his hand is a ritualized act performed as a religious observation of the Love Laws. He performs “as he had been taught” – that is, to meet Touchable expectations. This is an indicator of his successful discipline but also of his silent recognition of that which is Touchable. There is nothing in the narrative of this tableau to suggest that Ammu perceives Velutha as an agent of pollution; instead, his ritual gesture demonstrates a self-conscious awareness of being perceived as so, regardless of Ammu’s personal or unconscious intentions. There is also nothing here to suggest that Ammu is anxiously dependent on Velutha for his recognition of her as a Touchable, nor is there an indication of Velutha’s discomfort with the negative ontology of his position. After all, these are children, but like Fanon’s repeated references to white children loudly declaring their perception of him (“Look, a Negro”), the excuse of innocence does not lessen the inevitability of sublimating this ritual encounter as a scenario of unconscious subject-formation.

Through this encounter, both Ammu and Velutha undergo a symbolic process of subject formation: Velutha takes on the role of a disembodied, pollutant and therefore Untouchable hand; and Ammu takes on that of an inviolable, sacred Touchable body. In each case, the body is tightly sealed and its subjectivity is defined negatively through a set of prohibitions. The description of Velutha’s subjectivity as a symbolically disembodied hand emphasizes the rigid set of meanings ascribed to his body. His body has no meaning beyond its capacity to touch and therefore pollute, and it subsequently has no significance as a body in itself, let alone as a body that can move, speak, and take pleasure by its own free will. By contrast, Ammu’s gestures are symbolically reduced and restricted to the ontology of being an untouched Touchable body. This is understood as a position of social privilege, but the seal of its subjectivity is no less restrictive. If the definition of an Untouchable is made through the prohibition against those who cannot
touch, the definition of the Touchable is conversely revealed here through a prohibition against those who cannot be touched. Similarly, if the symbolism of Velutha’s disembodiment denies him the privilege of bodily agency, let it be said that the sacredness of Ammu’s body denies her the agency of being accessible to other bodies – especially Untouchable ones like Velutha’s.

Yet, in the climactic event of Velutha and Ammu’s transgressive lovemaking, the couple breaks the Love Laws by breaking the seals of their bodily subjectivities, and they find momentary liberation as “fear” as well as non-being subsides while “biology takes over” (318). It is also worth noting how the narrative of their sexual intercourse is followed with a reconstruction of their childhood tableau: “He folded his fear into a perfect rose. He held it out in the palm of his hand. She took it from him and put it in her hair” (319). Velutha performs the familiar gesture, but the distance between hand and body has already been breached. Thus, the Untouchable hand enjoys the pleasure of undisciplined embodiment, and the Touchable body is no longer sealed in its sacredness.

It is virtually a consensus among Roy’s scholarly readers, both her admirers as well as her critics, that Velutha and Ammu’s lovemaking represents liberation from the caste system – that is, the Love Laws. As will be discussed in section 2.6, there is also a debate over whether or not this transgression constitutes a legitimate form of political action, protest, or revolution. My position is slightly outside of this debate: I see the couple’s sexual union as a transgression of the Love Laws on Touchable and Untouchable relations as well as modes of being, but I also argue that caste represents only one aspect – one trope – within a larger field of power. This field of power as such represents the larger topos of Indianness. Having established the relational, ontological, and allegorical complexities of Roy’s fictional engagement with caste, the next three sections will map out the metaphysical field of power and Indianness that is imagined in the novel, beginning with Roy’s concept of Big Things. In this reading, the latter refers to a set of power networks that include familial, legal, and political systems, and how the power of these Big Things is articulated through the anxieties of the Touchable characters.
Where sections 4.1 to 4.3 have explored Roy’s dualistic typologies of caste (Untouchable and Touchable), of Untouchable subjectivities (grateful souls and insolent bodies), and of inter-caste relations (polluted hands and sacred bodies), section 4.4 will focus on the Touchable’s recognition of various Big Things as objects of taboo. This recognition as such places the Touchable subject in a position of “bipolar” anxiety: they are wary of becoming polluted by Untouchable hands, yet they are equally cautious about becoming “entangled” with Big Things. In either case, the issue here is not one of caste, so much as touch in a wide variety of forms that include, but are not limited to, the human body. To explore the nuances and anxieties surrounding acts of touch in this context, the next section will begin with a brief discussion of Freud’s work in *Totem and Taboo*.

### 4.4 The Taboo of Big Things

There are numerous problems with Freud’s work in *Totem and Taboo*. His references to the “savagery” of various forms of pre-modern, non-Western, and aboriginal cultures are undeniably racist. His arguments are also grounded on the work of his contemporary, Wilhelm Wundt, whose scholarship on aboriginal religion and mythology is no less suspect in terms of its evolutionist and Orientalist worldview. Having said that, my interest in *Totem and Taboo* remains because it continues to remind us of the ways in which the concepts of sacredness and pollution are inter-related and grounded within discourses of forbidden touch and inviolable taboo.\(^\text{86}\) In fact, as Freud points out (via

\(^{86}\) While working on this project, I have often heard senior colleagues working in religious studies speaking out against the rhetorical use of “the sacred” in any discussion of caste because it automatically evokes Christian discourses of the sacred and the profane or the modern Western variation of the sacred and the secular. Both of these are often said to be incommensurable with Hinduism’s *varnic* dualism of purity and pollution, and to impose one on the other is to reproduce the Eurocentric attitudes of early Indology. I concede that this may very well be the case for anthropological studies of Hinduism and other related South Asian religions, but the case of religion in literary fiction does not always play by the same rules, especially in an Indutva novel like *The God of Small Things* where caste is explored within a non-Hindu, Christian context. Ultimately, as I argue in this section, Roy’s representations of sacredness and pollution are not restricted to the sphere of religion; they encompass a larger field of power and one that is constituted through acts of touch.
Wundt), the very notion of taboo is defined ambivalently within various aboriginal traditions. Freud explains,

> For us the meaning of taboo branches off into two opposite directions. On the one hand it means to us sacred, consecrated: but on the other hand, it means uncanny, dangerous, forbidden and unclean. The opposite for taboo is designated in Polynesian by the word noa and signifies something ordinary and generally accessible. Thus something like the concept of reserve inheres in taboo; taboo expresses itself essentially in prohibitions and restrictions. (26)

According to Wundt, the “origin” of this definition lies in the mythologies of aboriginal culture, where all objects of taboo carry a “demonic power” that “avenges the touching of it or its forbidden use by bewitching the offender” (35-36). Over time, the ambivalence of taboo shifts to forms of bipolarity: “an antithesis of sacred and unclean” (36). In the modern age, similar forms of “touching phobia” have been observed by Freud with patients struggling with neurosis (38).

My interest here is not with regards to the “resemblances” between Wundt’s aboriginals, Freud’s neurotics, and Roy’s Touchables, nor is it to legitimize the anthropological aspects of Wundt or Freud’s Eurocentric claims on non-Western cultures and religions. Rather, I am interested in exploring how the bipolarity of sacredness and pollution can be used as a conceptual lens for reading Roy’s metaphysical field of power relations, and the position of Touchable subjects within it.

To reiterate, there is nothing essential about Velutha and his family’s ontology as agents of pollution; it is solely a matter of Touchable perception. The question then is what drives a Touchable to perceive an Untouchable in these tabooed terms? Is it an irrational fear of some demonic spirit (Wundt), or is it an essentially psychological disorder (Freud)? I argue that it is something altogether different, yet something – a Big Thing – that nevertheless carries elements that evoke both Wundt and Freud’s notions of sacred taboo. To explore this further, let us consider the case of Mammachi in her angry response to Ammu’s inter-caste transgression. In Mammachi’s eyes,
[Ammu] had defiled generations of breeding (The Little Blessed One, blessed personally by the Patriarch of Antioch, an Imperial Entomologist, a Rhodes scholar from Oxford) and brought the family to its knees. For generations to come, forever now, people would point at them at weddings and funerals. At baptisms and birthday parties, they’d nudge and whisper. It was all finished now. (244)

For those of us who have never experienced the communal expectations of caste culture, it would seem that Mammachi is simply making a huge deal out of nothing. One might even succeed in psychoanalyzing her hysteria as a case of neurotic behaviour, but that would also lead us to miss the overall significance of her reaction. For Mammachi, Ammu’s transgression constitutes a pollution of the family line and therefore a loss of power – that is, a loss for Mammachi. Power, in Mammachi’s view, is a matter of social privilege and prestige, as illustrated through the narrator’s references to various ceremonial events. The novel does not confirm whether or not these events are exclusive to Syrian Christians or Touchables in general, but it is evident in other sections of the novel that Mammachi gains much of her power and prestige by using these events as opportunities for boasting her family’s elite reputation and more importantly, for establishing her claim to that reputation. The narrator explains,

If [Mammachi] was invited to a wedding in Kottayam, she would spend the whole time whispering to whoever she went with, “The bride’s maternal grandfather was my father’s carpenter: Kunjukutty Eapen? His great-grandmother’s sister was just a midwife in Trivandrum. My husband’s family used to own this whole hill.” (160)

For Mammachi, her sense of power goes beyond mere “bragging rights.” The family line is a social network built through a history of contacts and connections, and Mammachi secures her power to this network through a rhetoric of contiguity, a restricted form of touch at the level of poetic language (metonymy). In her mind (and surely others of her milieu), the family line is sacred and inviolable. It is untouchable (sans capitals) but its greater significance is that it represents a Big Thing because it is a system of power that
exceeds the individual, regardless of caste. Roy’s focus is on the anxiety it provokes in the minds of her Touchable subjects. In Mammachi’s case, her desire is to remain in a position of power by articulating a sense of contiguity with the aura of the family line: that is, of being in close proximity, but not to the extent of breaking its sacred taboos.

This concept of aura is derived from Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (41). He defines it as “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be” (222). As Mammachi demonstrates, a certain element of closeness to the family line allows one to establish contiguity while preserving the necessary element of distance. The latter is necessary because aura is partly an object of perception, and aura as such comes into being through the viewer’s awareness of that distance. Benjamin illustrates by way of the following example: “If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch” (222-223). The aura can be seen and intuited, but it cannot be touched. Aura as such is also derived through “ritual function” and especially for works of art that are unique, irreproducible and therefore preserved in context-specific settings: “the unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value” (224). Aura as such is secured through rituals of distanced viewing, the performance of which arguably serves to assign a taboo of sacredness and inviolability to the artwork.

There are at least two kinds of aura in Roy’s fictional universe. The first is that which glows from sacred Touchable bodies. However, this particular glow is the effect of the distance that is preserved, perceived, and recognized by the subject of an Untouchable hand. The distance between Velutha’s upturned palm and Ammu’s tabooed fingers is a good example of how Touchable auras come into being; Roy does not offer a literal depiction of this aura, but she arguably indicates its invisible presence through Velutha and Ammu’s customary gestures. The second form of aura is derived through a Touchable’s relationship with a Big Thing such as family, law, or government. The auras of all such Big Things are similarly produced through the presence of distance, but its appearance is different from that of a Touchable’s sacred aura. A Big Thing is not
constituted as a sealed body; it is a network. While there is power to be derived through gestures of contiguity to the aura of family, law, or government, it is crucial for the Touchable to avoid the possibility of entanglement – the negative experience of being “touched” and therefore disempowered by a Big Thing. While Mammachi’s reaction highlights the importance of having contiguity with the aura of familial lineage, the interactions between Baby Kochamma, Inspector Mathew, and Comrade Pillai foreground the politics of entanglement with systems of law and government. In this particular set of interactions, the three Touchables find themselves in various positions of bipolar anxiety over the polluting touch of an Untouchable hand as well as the punitive touch of a networked Big Thing, and they resolve that anxiety by preserving an auratic distance to both objects of taboo.

The Touchable’s bipolar anxiety is not one of violence or oppression, and it is certainly not comparable to the self-negating position of the Untouchable subject. Nor is this is to be taken as simply a psychological disorder. Instead, the Touchable’s bipolar anxiety is read here as a political predicament: that is, the predicament of negotiating one’s privileges and subjectivity within a field of power that is unique to Roy’s fictional idea of India. In the case of Mammachi, the dynamics of her anxiety are relatively straightforward: she secures her power through her distance from Untouchables and her contiguity with the network of her Big family line. It is amazing how this sense of power is then threatened by Ammu’s inter-caste transgression: her symbolic acts of self-pollution and the willful violation of her Touchable body’s sacred seal, all of which are produced through a singular act of forbidden touch. If Mammachi’s anxiety here is panicked and rhapsodic, it has little to do with her concern over the possibility that Ammu has sacrificed her own sense of power and privilege. Rather, it is the possibility that Ammu’s pollution will disrupt Mammachi’s contiguity to the pride of the family line and its aura of networked power.

Mammachi’s feverish sense of anxiety is relatively straightforward and mostly because the two poles are stable and synchronous: the Bigness of her familial lineage on one side and the pollution of Untouchable touch on the other. It highlights Mammachi’s anxiety, but nothing more than that. In the twin cases of Inspector Thomas Mathew and Baby
Kochamma, their sense of bipolar anxiety is far more dynamic. The first sign of this surfaces in Mathew’s responses to Baby Kochamma’s First Information Report: “She mentioned seeing [Velutha] in the march on the way to Cochin and the rumors that he was or had been a Naxalite. She didn’t notice the faint furrow of worry that this piece of information produced on the Inspector’s brow” (247). The sudden revelation of Mathew’s anxiety (“the faint furrow of worry”) is interesting given that he had just “chastised” Baby Kochamma for being so liberal and lax with her Untouchable worker (247). The source of his anxiety is then made explicit a moment later:

Inspector Thomas Mathew was a prudent man. He took one precaution. He sent a jeep to fetch Comrade K. N. M. Pillai to the police station. It was crucial for him to know whether the Paravan had any political support or whether he was operating alone. Though he himself was a Congress man, he did not intend to risk any run-ins with the Marxist government. (248)

In Mammachi’s case, her anger is partly triggered by Ammu’s pollution, by Velutha’s symbolic presence as an agent of pollution. For Mathew, that presence acquires new meaning with the possibility of Velutha’s contiguity to the network of the Communist Party and the relationship between Pillai’s local office and the Kerala state government within its trans-regional web. Velutha’s contiguity to the aura of this Big Thing is probably not potent enough to remove the taboo of his perceived Untouchability nor would it grant him the seal of a sacred Touchable body. Yet, it does suggest the possibility of recasting him radically as a taboo figure. That said, once Comrade Pillai confirms that “Velutha did not have the patronage or the protection of the Communist Party”, Mathew’s anxiety begins to subside (248). It is only with the assurance that Velutha is “on his own” that Mathew can get away with arresting – that is, touching – him without becoming entangled with the Communist Party (248).

Like Mammachi, Mathew is concerned with losing his power as a Touchable subject, let alone his political position and sense of belonging to an elite class. This fear is illustrated in the image of him mentally going over the conversation with Pillai, “teasing it, testing its logic, looking for loopholes” before making his decision to arrest Velutha official
Yet, once the History House episode is over, it becomes apparent that his methods are not wholly in control of his irrational Touchable impulses. His dread of entanglement with the Communist Party gives way to a crucial oversight. The absence of Ammu’s FIR and the children’s own testimony reveals that he and his men may have arrested and punished Velutha on unlawful grounds. In Mathew’s mind, this raises a second possibility of entanglement, this time with the law: “True. [Velutha] was a Paravan. True, he had misbehaved. But these were troubled times and technically, as per the law, he was an innocent man. There was no case” (298). The law represents another Big and tabooed Thing, and Mathew’s entanglement with the latter would subsequently entail a re-entanglement with the Communist Party, if made public: “[Mathew] knew that given the political climate, he himself could be in serious trouble. He was aware that Comrade K. N. M. Pillai would not pass up this opportunity” (299). Mathew’s anxiety thus goes beyond one of a bipolar predicament as the ambivalence of his position within this field of power has now gone multi-directional. His predicament does not earn Mathew the reader’s sympathy, especially given his violent strategy of resolution, but if his problem lies with Velutha’s contiguity with both the law and the Communist Party, then the answer, for Mathew, is to simply defer his responsibility for Velutha. The touch of the latter is thus deferred to Baby Kochamma through the means of Mathew’s ultimatums: “Either the rape-victim must file a complaint. Or the children must identify the Paravan as their abductor in the presence of a police witness… Or I must charge you with lodging a false F.I.R. Criminal offense” (299). Like Mathew, Baby Kochamma is a selfish Touchable and more concerned with avoiding entanglement and thus securing her own sense of privilege than doing the rightful thing. Thus, she proceeds to defer the touch of responsibility to the twins and succeeds largely through a rhetorical strategy of terrorizing them with thoughts of their mother’s suffering and their own eternal damnation; the God of Christianity is thus invoked as a Big Thing. This chain of deferred touch continues, linking Estha and eventually Velutha as he is made to officially hold responsibility for the “murder” of Sophie Mol and the “kidnapping” of the twins, but also unofficially for his own punishment and subsequent death in the History House episode (286).
At a figurative level, there is something darkly comical about this chain of deferred touch and responsibility. It is almost as though the burden of Velutha’s body is being passed from one set of hands to another, each attempting to absolve and relieve themselves of its touch out of fear of entanglement, and very much in the spirit of the “hot potato” game played by children in North America. For Velutha, this chain ends with the removal of his body: “Dumped in the themmady kuzhy – the pauper’s pit – where the police routinely dump their dead” (304). The rhetoric of “dumping” here serves doubly as an analogue to Roy’s grotesque descriptions of the Meenachal River early on in the novel’s frame narrative. The latter detail is significant because it arguably highlights an ideological and perhaps “religious” difference between those who uphold the power of Love Laws and the Big Things, and those who live outside this field of power.

Dumped with “shit and pesticides bought with World Bank loans”, the Meenachal is portrayed not only as a site of environmental decay but it is also a reflection of Ayemenem’s denouement as a Conradian Heart of Darkness (14). As some of Roy’s eco-critical readers have argued, the Meenachal thus represents an oppressed body or subjectivity, abused by the forces of late twentieth-century, transnational capitalism and in ways that parallel Velutha’s experience with the caste system. Peter Mortensen writes,

> Although they may seem very different things, the Ipe family’s terror at “the scourge of Untouchability” is continuous with the same characters’ attempt to keep nature at arm’s length. Hierarchical thinking, Roy believes, pits men against nature as surely as it pits the upper classes against the lower classes and men against women. (191)

Mortensen’s attempt to recognize the common ground of all oppression here is noble, but it also seems to lean on a universalism which risks flattening the differences between these systems of power. A more complex approach might be found in Aarthi Vadde and Susan Comfort’s separate readings of the novel, where the juxtaposition of caste violence, environmental pollution, global capitalism, and other such forms of injustice are characteristic of Roy’s fictional as well as non-fictional critique of power as a product of
numerous “interlocking” systems.\textsuperscript{87} I would like to contribute to this discussion by emphasizing the issue of casteism and Un/Touchability as a point of disjuncture, rather than one of overlap or analogy, with the tragedy of the Meenachal. As Mortensen himself notes, “[n]ot surprisingly, characters in this world seem little affected by nature, and apparently pay little heed to it” (187). One possible reason for this level of disinterest is the Touchable’s bipolar anxiety: their obsession with the imagined threat of pollution, the risk of entanglement, and the loss of power and privilege through these and other such acts of touch. This obsession fuels their anxiety, and it consequently defers all environmental issues to the blind-spot of their consciousness. In short, the pollution of the Meenachal occurs because the river is not viewed as a Big Thing in their eyes; it lacks the aura of power – of networked power – and thus there is no reason for a Touchable to establish contiguity with it, nor is there an anxiety of becoming entangled with it. Instead, the Touchables care no more about the river’s fate than they do for Velutha’s Untouchable body when it is dumped in the \textit{themmady kuzhy}.

This lack of consciousness for the river and the environment in general is specific to the Touchable worldview, one that is wholly shaped by the triad of sacredness, pollution, and Big Things within a field of auratic power, as outlined in this section. Yet, Roy’s novel is also populated with individuals who operate outside this worldview, and one such example is arguably the figure of the anonymous fisherman who recovers Sophie Mol’s body. Roy describes his thought process as he returns the child’s corpse back to the other side of the river: “He rows home… thinking how wrong it is for a fisherman to believe that he knows the river well. No one knows the Meenachal. No one knows what it may snatch or suddenly yield. Or when. That is what makes fishermen pray” (245). The fisherman is never identified in terms of his religious identity, let alone of his caste (\textit{jati}

\textsuperscript{87} As Vadde writes, “Velutha’s beating is the result of a social pathology masquerading as a collective ethics, and Roy locks it into the same symbolic economy as Baby Kochamma’s ornamental garden and Pappachi’s moth. Each of these images present power struggles, wherein civilization is safeguarded by the disciplining of plant, animal and human others” (532-533). Comfort elaborates on this further by locating Roy within a larger tradition of eco-feminist thinkers: “The theoretical and imaginative perspectives represented in their research and activism have made possible an understanding of the interconnection of gender, class, and caste exploitation and environmental destruction to an underlying pattern of capitalist accumulation” (1).
or Un/Touchable identity), but his sense of reverence and connection with the river marks his and the river’s location outside the Touchable’s triadic field of power. It also separates him from the “religion” that absorbs Hindus, Christians, and even Communists to uphold the sovereignty of the Love Laws. Perhaps there is fear in the fisherman’s prayers, but I would not read it as a “dread of contact”. The Meenachal is not taboo. It is a big thing for the fisherman and it is arguably an object of his religious devotion – that is, his bhakti. The significance of his bhakti also lies in relation to the river’s presence as a big thing sans capitals: that is, a small point of rupture against the totalizing forces of the novel’s dominant, yet fictional, field of power. The river, as a symbol of nature in general, is imagined by the fisherman as neither an agent of pollution nor a force of entanglement.

This field of power, with its triad of auratic distances between sacred Touchable bodies, polluted Untouchable hands, and various Big Things, is the topos of Indianness within Roy’s fictional universe. The next section of this chapter will present a more complete view of this topos as such by examining the allegorical significance of the Big God and his mock epic battle with the Small God. This battle is partly presented as an allegory for India’s postcolonial modernity, but it is also metonymically tied to the personal predicaments of Rahel and Estha as adults who, in the novel’s frame narrative, continue to live with the traumas of their childhood. This supplemental element of metonymy enunciates one of the most important tropes of Indianness in the novel: the impersonal and its “Big” value as a marker of political currency; and conversely, the personal as a “Small” site of resistance to the latter. However, in order to fully engage the significance of the Big God’s allegory and the politics of the impersonal (as well as the personal), the next section will begin by focussing on Comrade K. N. M. Pillai and his role in the events that lead up and follow Velutha’s death.
4.5 India and the Economy of the Impersonal

Pillai’s role in the History House episode and Velutha’s subsequent death is summed up in the novel’s first chapter, amidst the introduction of his personal-professional history. The passage below speaks doubly to his responsibility as well as his worldview:

Though his part in the whole thing had by no means been a small one, Comrade Pillai didn’t hold himself responsible for what had happened. He dismissed the whole business as the Inevitable Consequence of Necessary Politics. The old omelette-and-eggs thing. But then, Comrade K. N. M. Pillai was essentially a political man. A professional omeletter. He walked through the world like a chameleon. Never revealing himself, never appealing not to. Emerging through the chaos unscathed. (15)

The term “unscathed” connotes a sense of being “untouched” and in ways that relate directly to the bipolarity of Touchable subjectivity, though also in ways that lack the sense of nervous anxiety otherwise displayed by Mammachi, Inspector Mathew, and Baby Kochamma. This lack is illustrated when Mathew calls Pillai into the Kottayam police station and requests an explanation of his relationship with Velutha:

Comrade Pillai told Inspector Mathew that he was acquainted with Velutha, but omitted to mention that Velutha was a member of the Communist Party, or that Velutha had knocked on the door late the previous night, which made Pillai the last person to have seen Velutha before he disappeared. Nor, though he knew it was untrue, did Comrade Pillai refute the allegation of attempted rape in Baby Kochamma’s First Information Report. (my italics 248)

If Pillai were to give this testimony within the setting of a court trial, he might be found guilty of perjury. In the slightly less official context of the Kottayam police station, Pillai’s numerous “omissions” are performed strategically to avoid and defer his responsibility, and consequently avoid any possibility of Velutha’s pollution or his own entanglement with any of the Big Things. Pillai’s sense of strategy is emphasized here because it is one of the characteristics that distinguish him as a Touchable who arguably
understands the metaphysics of Roy’s fictional field of power better than any other Touchable character in her novel. This is also why he is portrayed as someone more calm, self-assured, and over-confident than anyone else in the History House episode.

In the context of the Indutva narrative tradition, Pillai is arguably Roy’s closest analogue to the fictional Brahmans of Passage and Serpent. What makes Pillai similar to Godbole and Rama is a shared awareness of the metaphysical. However, in the case of The God of Small Things, the realm of the metaphysical is not Neo-Vedantic; rather, it is a fictional system of “first principles” that networks the aурatic powers of family, law, government and other such Big Things. As a result, Pillai’s sense of commitment cannot be exactly described as dharma. For Godbole and Rama, dharma is fulfilled through various rituals and caste obligations. Thus, the Brahminical view of dharma is ethical; it is something that has to be done in order to achieve a collective evocation of brahman. The fulfillment of Brahminical dharma inevitably involves an assumption of power, but it is also apparent that power as such is regarded by both Gobole and Rama as an object of impersonal desire. On this point, Pillai is closer to Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Inspector Mathew in that he is clearly a selfish Touchable, for whom power is always an object of personal desire. Thus, his approach to the Love Laws and the Big Things is not grounded in ethics so much as pragmatism and this is what makes him “essentially a political man.”

It is through Pillai’s characterization that the twin realms of religion and politics are further articulated within Roy’s metaphysical field of power. Religion, I argue, is imagined here as a commitment to, though not necessarily a belief in, the sovereignty of the Love Laws, and it is observed as such by both Touchables and Untouchables (like Vellya Paapen). Religion is obviously a system of power – the power of the Love Laws, the privileges of the Touchables, etc. – but a political approach to power is different from a religious one because it involves a strategy of careful and even rhetorical negotiation with religion as such in order to achieve power and more importantly, to satisfy desire at a personal level. While this concept of the political is vital to all Touchable characters, the case of Pillai is an exemplary one.
In his last face-to-face encounter with Velutha, Pillai offers the following as a rationale for the Communist Party’s need for distance: “comrade, you should know that Party was not constituted to support workers’ *indiscipline* in their *private* life” (my italics 271). Pillai’s choice of words speaks to Velutha’s lack of bodily discipline – his insolence. He also makes a direct allusion to Velutha’s affair with Ammu as an act of “private” and therefore personal desire that carries the potential of “polluting” the Party’s reputation. As Pillai closes the door on Velutha, he furthers his sense of disinterest and aural distance as he shouts the following slogans:

- *It is not in the Party’s interest to take up such matters.*
- *Individual’s interest is subordinate to the organization’s interest.*
- *Violating Party Discipline means violating Party Unity.* (271)

Pillai succeeds in both alienating Velutha and re-caste-ing his local office of the Communist Party as an organization exclusive to Touchables. There is also the sense that while Velutha hears Pillai’s voice as a “disembodied” presence from behind the door, Pillai’s use of those slogans re-presents himself as a ventriloquized body (271). Yet, Pillai’s act of self-ventriloquism is different from Vellya Paapen’s and this is largely because Pillai has his own agenda of gaining a seat in the “Legislative Assembly”; it is performed as a means to power, rather than merely survival (267). This object of personal desire is suspected, but is otherwise masked in the impersonal rhetoric of Party slogans. As the “Work is Struggle” chapter comes to a close, Pillai continues to ventriloquize this rhetoric but in ways that foreground the artifice of his performance: “The voice went on. Sentences disaggregated into phrases. Words” (272). The mask of impersonal desire does not exactly come off, but it is revealed here as empty rhetoric – empty because Pillai believes no more in its collectivist call than he does in the caste binaries of the Love Laws. The latter is made evident during “the Marxist Party siege of Paradise Pickles” (266). In this coda to the History House episode, Pillai reclaims Velutha as a “Paravan” who had been wrongly accused for the simple reason that “he was an active member of the Communist Party” (286). Pillai further defends the “Rights of Untouchables” and affirms a universalistic view of oppression in his speeches (“Caste is class, comrades”) (266). Yet again, these are clearly nothing but pragmatic, rhetorical gestures made by “a political man.”
Thus, while Pillai fails to win his Assembly seat (“He broke the eggs, but burned the omelette”) he remains an exemplary Touchable because he represents a third strategy of securing Touchable power within the field of Indianness. If Mammachi’s was a strategy of contiguity, and Mathew’s one of disentanglement and deferral, Pillai’s case represents one of negotiating the personal with the impersonal – personal desire with impersonal rhetoric. He also further distinguishes himself from Mammachi and Mathew through his perspective of Roy’s field of Indianness: that is, as an allegorical space of centripetal orientation to the Big God, rather than merely the aura of Big Things.

The concept of a singular Big God is invoked only once in the novel and it is within the micro-narrative of Rahel’s brief and unsuccessful marriage to the American academic, Larry McCaslin. The invocation of the Big God has nothing directly to do with Pillai or any of the other Touchable characters, let alone the local contexts of Ayemenem. Nevertheless, its presence here is tropological: the Big God is a fictional myth for the Indutva concept of the impersonal. The significance of the impersonal is also isolated here as the key to unlocking the meaning of the gaze that Rahel directs at her former husband during the most intimate moments of their marriage. The following is the first of the narrator’s two translations of her unspeakable gaze:

[Larry] was exasperated because he didn’t know what that look meant. He put it somewhere between indifference and despair. He didn’t know that in some places, like the country that Rahel came from, various kinds of despair competed for primacy. And that personal despair could never be desperate enough. That something happened when personal turmoil dropped by at the wayside shrine of the vast, violent, circling, driving, ridiculous, insane, unfeasible, public turmoil of a nation. (20)

Just as Rahel’s gaze is unspeakable, it is interesting that “India” is similarly unnameable in this translation. However, it is clear that the idea of India is articulated here as a diasporic reference to home (“the country that Rahel came from”) as well as to the political project of postcolonial Indian modernity (“nation”). Yet, the “nation” as such is not imagined according to any of the political systems or grand ideological narratives that
have come to define it through its twentieth-century history: Gandhian populism, Nehruvian socialism, Hindutva fascism, etc. Instead, India is uniquely imagined here as a nation generated and regenerated through an affective economy and more specifically, a competition between different degrees of “despair” and emotion in general. Like “India,” the term “impersonal” is absent from this passage, but it is evoked implicitly through the italicization of “personal” and more importantly, the narrator’s rhetoric of negation. Thus, if “personal despair could never be enough,” the logical interpretation is that impersonal despair is what matters most in a country “poised forever between the terror of war and the horror of peace” (20). This image brings to mind postcolonial India’s longstanding tensions with Pakistan, China, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, but Roy’s emphasis here is arguably is on the power of the impersonal as a trope of collective bonding; this is also to say that the impersonal is understood here as a metaphysical principle, not unlike the Love Laws in the novel’s first chapter or the notion of brahman in Neo-Vedantic discourse.

Roy’s trope of the impersonal is developed further through her allegory of the Big God and his relationship with the Small God “at the wayside shrine” of the nation. Her narrator explains:

That Big God howled like a hot wind, and demanded obeisance. Then Small God (cozy and contained, private and limited) came away cauterized, laughing numbly at his own temerity. Inured by the confirmation of his own inconsequence, he became resilient and truly indifferent. Nothing mattered much. Nothing much mattered. And the less it mattered, the less it mattered. It was never important enough. Because Worse Things had happened. (my italics 20)

As mentioned in section 4.1, some of Roy’s scholarly readers have explored the rhetorical significance of “Big” and “Small” as metaphors for the dynamics of the political and the personal, or the elite and the subaltern. However, all such readings overlook the significance of these terms specifically within Roy’s fictional myth, and in
most cases, the myth is not even mentioned. For me, the key word in the passage above is “cauterized.” According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term has a history of dual meanings, both figurative and literal as well as religious and secular. The figurative usage of “cauterize” is with regards to a state of psycho-spiritual health: “To ‘sear,’ deaden, render insensible (the conscience, feelings, etc.).” The OED suggests that this particular use of “cauterize” is derived from the use of “sear” in the Bible’s First Book of Timothy: “…some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils; Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron” (I Tim. IV:1-2 qtd. in “Cauterize”). The cauterization of the Small God appears to reverse the Christian connotation, as his conscience is similarly seared by the force of a sovereign God, rather than of the Devil. The second definition of “cauterize” is “[t]o burn or sear with a hot iron or a caustic.” An example of its usage is in a Renaissance play by Philip Massinger (1624): “Old fester’d sores Must be lanc’d to the quicke and cauteriz’d” (qtd. in “Cauterize”). Here, the body is seared in order to cleanse it for medical treatment. While this definition is both more literal and secular than the first, it connotes a sense of cleansing and purification that resonates well within the Indutva context of varna and caste subjectivity. However, in the context of Roy’s fictional myth, the Small God’s cauterization does not exalt him as “pure.” Instead, it has the tragic effect of violently transforming him into an object of profound apathy (“Nothing mattered much. Nothing much mattered…”). The Small God is doubly transformed into a trickster figure, marked by the nonsense of his “hollow laughter” (20). He does not speak, but as he continues to laugh “numbly at his own temerity” and the “relativeness smallness of his misfortune,” the Small God thus comes to appear as a ventriloquized subject, one that has been disciplined to sound out his deep sense of self-hatred and ultimately his internalization of the Big God’s worldview: that is, a worldview which gives privilege to the impersonal and denies all legitimacy of the personal.

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88 One exception of a mythological reading is in a brief discussion by Urbashi Barat: “The God of Small Things is clearly related to what sociologists and cultural anthropologists in India today refer to as the Little Gods of the Hindu tradition, the deities of folklore and of everyday worship, as contrasted with the deities of the Great Tradition, imposing, autocratic, awe-inspiring” (71).
The Small God’s encounter with the Big God could also be described as dialectical, given how he shifts from a position of antithesis to one of synthesis. This might serve as another analogue to Hegel’s master-slave dialectic and one where the Big God and his Small counterpart are similarly involved in “a struggle to death”. However, while such interpretations would probably be valid, their focus is likely to be on the Big God’s transcendence, whereas this discussion focuses more on the Small God’s experience of violence and largely so because that appears to be the emphasis of Roy’s fictional myth. The Small God undergoes a symbolic process of violent de-personalization, the dynamics of which echo as well as invert M. N. Srinivas’ concept of Sanskritization and caste mobility. Where acts of Sanskritization involve a collective absorption of Sanskritic culture, Roy’s allegory of de-personalization involves a denial of the impersonal and an affirmation of the impersonal – the Big God – as a point of centripetality as well as sovereignty.

As discussed in Chapter One, Srinivas acknowledges that there are limits to the degree of agency that a lower-caste group is able to afford through collective acts of Sanskritization. Roy’s allegory of de-personalization echoes this through the Small God’s experience of restriction within the Big God’s space of iconographic order. In his metamorphosis from a symbol of personal despair to one of ventriloquized laughter, the Small God is disciplined and subsequently granted a marginal place of conditional privilege within this space. He does not become a Big God, but his discipline makes him Bigger than he was before. Thus, he comes to laugh and enjoy the restricted pleasures of his asymmetrical relationship to the Big God, one that evokes the Hindu iconographic tradition of portraying small god devotees and big god deities: i.e., Hanuman prostrating before Rama, Shiva seated on Nandi, etc. This is not to say that Roy’s allegory of depersonalization should necessarily be taken as a critique of similar small god-big god relationships in Hindu iconography. Rather, her allegory highlights a few important points of contrast with the latter tradition: i.e., the idealization of small gods as disciples
and devotees in Hindu mythology; and a critical discourse on the disciplining and de-personalization of the Small God in Roy’s fictional allegory.  

That said, there are also a few points of similarity between these two cases of myth and iconography. The first is with regard to the general (Hindu or otherwise) concept of religious iconography as a visual representation of cosmic order. In this interpretation of Roy’s Small God, the sound of his laughter is a sign of his marginal position within the Big God’s iconographic order of impersonal and de-personalized Things. This iconography illustrates the devaluation of the personal within an economy of affective competition. Ultimately, this allegory of economic order serves as a symbol for the dynamics of India as a postcolonial nation. If all nations are constructed in Benedict Anderson’s terms as “imagined communities,” this minor episode re-imagines India as a very different kind of community: a cult of the impersonal, where the referent of the Big God is sovereign and the Small God, in his cauterized, de-personalized, trickster form, is the iconographic object of bhakti on a mass collective scale. I want to invoke bhakti here as a variation on its conventional meaning in studies of pre-colonial Hinduism: bhakti as an affective practice, but one that substitutes the emotions of love with “despair”; and bhakti as a practice that is oriented to neither an impersonal (nirguna) nor a personal (saguna) representation of the divine. Instead, the political bhakti that defines this unnameable country that Rahel comes from is practiced simply through an absolute denial of all that constitutes the personal.

On a more literal level, it is worth remembering that the allegory of the Big God and the Small God’s violent encounter is only the first of the narrator’s two translations of Rahel’s unspeakable gaze and thus only one aspect of Roy’s imagined idea of Indianness. The allegory translates the gaze as the source of her American ex-husband’s

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89 Balram Halwai, the narrator of Arvind Adiga’s The White Tiger, casts the figure of Hanuman similarly as “the faithful servant of the god Rama” and therefore a religious symbol of lower-caste as well as underclass marginality (16). He tells his Chinese interlocutor, “we worship him in our temples because he is a shining example of how to serve your masters with absolute fidelity, love, and devotion. These are the kinds of gods they have foisted on us, Mr. Jiabao. Understand, now, how hard it is for a man to win his freedom in India” (16).
“exasperation” and the subsequent crisis in their marriage. As the narrator brings this translation to a close, the crisis is figuratively elaborated as the outcome of Larry’s encounter with the Small God’s de-personalized, iconographic presence:

So Small God laughed a hollow laugh, and skipped away cheerfully. Like a rich boy in shorts. He whistled, kicked stones. The source of his brittle elation was the relative smallness of his misfortune. He climbed into people’s eyes and became an exasperating expression. (20)

The synesthetic transformation of the Small God’s nonsensical laughter into the visual form of a gaze has, for Larry McCaslin, the effect of an iconographic encounter – that is, the experience of darsana. As discussed in section 2.1, the latter is the term used to describe the visual as well as ritual experience of Hindu iconography. As Diana L. Eck explains,

[t]he central act of Hindu worship, from the point of view of the lay person, is to stand in the presence of the deity and to behold the image with one’s own eyes, to see and be seen by the deity… Beholding the image is an act of worship, and through the eyes one gains the blessings of the divine. (1998 3)

Larry’s figurative experience with the Small God may be non-ritualistic, but it is also darsanic to the extent that it invokes a double-perception of seeing and being seen. Where this turns ironic is in the Small God’s substitution of blessing with mockery. Larry’s experience of this iconographic encounter thus echoes Homi Bhabha’s concept of non-sense, as discussed in section 2.6.

Yet, unlike the echo of “ou-boum” in the Marabar caves or the inscription of “God si Love” in the Mau temple, the significance of mocking Larry McCaslin is unique. He may be a white male, but he is an American and it might be a stretch to read him as a synecdochal agent of either American cultural imperialism or neo-Orientalism. He enters the narrative as a doctoral researcher doing his fieldwork in India. His topic is hardly one that typifies the mainstream of Orientalist scholarship: “Energy Efficiency in Vernacular Architecture” (19). The concept of vernacular here is arguably a synonym for the
anthropological concept of “little” (desi) and its polar contrast with “great” (marg) traditions in pre-colonial South Asian studies (Ramanujan 1973 23-3). I have yet to find anything in anthropology or religious studies that suggests a synonymy between desi, “little”-ness and the personal, but in the case of Larry McCaslin, his interest in vernacular culture is clearly paralleled by his general curiosity with Small Things, some of which explain the nature of his attraction to Rahel: the “tiny diamond gleam in one nostril”; the “tiny pulse” on “the corner of her mouth”; and ultimately, the “precious” nature of her body as a “gift” (“Given to him in love. Something still and small”) (my italics 19-20). Just as one form of Smallness is narrated as the source of Larry’s attraction, another is then narrated as the source of his estrangement: that is, the Smallness of the God that is subjected to violent denial, cauterization, and de-personalization within a Bigger order of Things. Thus, Larry McCaslin’s experience of nonsense is very different from that of Bhabha’s colonial subject. He is not mocked for his attempt to impose an epistemological order on the East. Rather, it is because he is, up until his marriage, blind or ignorant of the order of Big Things, the effects of its violence on all manifestations of the Small, and ultimately the significance of this dialectic as an allegorical explanation of the unnameable country that Rahel comes from as well as McCaslin’s failure to understand its essential dynamics of power.

That said, this is merely one translation of Rahel’s unspeakable gaze, one that is almost negated in the rhetoric of the narrator’s second translation:

What Larry McCaslin saw in Rahel’s eyes was not despair at all, but a sort of enforced optimism. And a hollow where Estha’s words had been. He couldn’t be expected to understand that. That the emptiness in one twin was only a version of the quietness in the other. That the two things fitted together. Like stacked spoons. Like familiar lover’s bodies. (20-21)

On the surface, this appears to be a less multi-layered, allegorical translation, devoid of any references to the nation, its political project of postcolonial modernity, or its figurative foundations in a process of de-personalization. Instead, it turns our attention back to the local context of Ayemenem, the memory of Velutha’s death and Estha’s role
in that tragedy. While the sexual innuendo of the translation above makes obvious references to the inevitability of the twins’ incestuous transgressions, the denotation of “quietness” as a euphemism for Estha’s trauma and the possibility of its metonymic relationship to the first translation’s allegory of Big and Small Gods is arguably of greater significance. As the narrator suggests, the origins of Estha’s “quietness” remain uncertain:

no one could pinpoint with any degree of accuracy when (the year, if not the month or day) he had stopped talking. Stopped talking altogether that is. The fact is that there wasn’t an “exactly when.’ It had been a gradual winding down and closing shop. A barely noticeably quietening. (12).

Yet, if readers are permitted to isolate a pivotal event in Estha’s trajectory, they might find it in the Kottayam police station episode, when Estha suddenly finds himself linked in the chain of deferred responsibility. Unlike Mathew and Baby Kochamma, his motives for participating in this chain are uniquely unselfish; he simply wants to save his mother and he does so with a one-word testimony:

The Inspector asked his question. Estha’s mouth said Yes.
Childhood tiptoed out.
Silence slid in like a bolt. (303)

Estha’s one-word testimony is narrated as a case of ventriloquist speech. It also marks the event through which his “quietness” is further developed as an imprisonment of the body (“silence slid in like a bolt”). As the narrative of Estha’s trajectory continues, it also breaks from the patterns established by Mathew and Baby Kochamma because while Estha succeeds in deferring responsibility, he does not find any relief. Instead, he grows into a man obsessed with cleaning his room and washing his clothes. These may be acts – even rituals, given their regularity – of purification, but they are performed to no end and thus bring him neither relief from a feeling of pollution nor an aura of sacred power. Ultimately, the narrative of Estha’s “quietness” ends with the symbolism of an incurable disease that “stayed and spread” like a virus and continues to subject him to the narcotic effects of its “inky tranquilizer” (13). Of course, these descriptions are not literal, but
their rhetoric of illness can be taken as an extended metaphor on the predicament of what I would call a spiritual dis-ease: a liminal and condition of existential crisis, of living-in-death and dying-in-life, without the relief of finality, and thus a lack of “ease”. According to the narrator’s diagnosis, the absolute origins of Estha’s “quietness” are never fully known, but the emergence of its manifestation as a dis-ease is nevertheless isolated on the night of Velutha’s death:

... What came for them?

Not death. Just the death of living. (304)

Thus, if Estha’s quietness represents one manifestation of this dis-ease, then Rahel’s “emptiness”, her “enforced optimism,” is arguably another manifestation of the same existential crisis. Like the twins themselves, the two narratives of dis-ease have a complementary relationship; they fit together like “stacked spoons” or “familiar lovers’ bodies” (21).

Given this rhetoric of discursive contact, connection, and touch, the possibility of similar connections between the two translations of Rahel’s gaze becomes an important question. Is there a relationship between the experience of dis-ease and the nation? And if there is a relationship, is it necessarily one of national allegory, as theorized by Fredric Jameson? My simple answer to these questions is that there is indeed a relationship and it is allegorical. However, it is also one that challenges the reader to reconsider Jameson’s concept and the nature of allegories on the personal and political in general.

In his controversial essay, “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism”, Jameson conceptualizes national allegory according to the following paradigm: “the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society” (69). Although Jameson places a great deal of rhetorical emphasis on “allegory”, I would argue that his concept is predicated on a logic of metaphorical substitution: the private realm as a metaphor for the public; the personal for the political; and the individual for the community, which includes the imagined community of the nation. As Aijaz Ahmad points out in In Theory, a major problem here is Jameson’s flat, homogenous, and marginalizing view of “Third
World” literatures, histories, and political economies. Nevertheless, the significance of Jameson’s essay remains strong for raising questions on works of postcolonial fiction that do in fact contain allegories of state violence, rather than state development. A good example of this is in Alex Tickell’s brief comparison of The God of Small Things to Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children:

Like Rushdie in Midnight’s Children, Roy is deeply interested in the relationship between personal lives and national events in the subcontinent, and her references to the ‘Big God’ of ‘the vast, violent, circling, driving, ridiculous, insane, unfesable, public turmoil of a nation’ recall the allegorical connections that ‘handcuff’ Rushdie’s narrator, Saleem to India’s national history. (47)

This comparison could be developed further using the concept of dis-ease as a point of similarity. When Saleem narrates the personal experience of torture to which he and the other “children” are subjected to during the Emergency, he supplements the historical phenomenon of forced sterilizations with a fictional one: “Sperectomy: the draining out of hope” (503). Once again, an existential crisis is narrated through the use of a medical metaphor and thus appears as an analogue to Rahel and Estha’s affective responses of dis-ease. However, in this particular instance of Rushdie’s novel, the causal relationship between nation and dis-ease, the personal and the political, is literal – not metaphorical. It is not enough to call it metonymy because as far as Saleem is concerned, the Emergency was essentially a conspiracy against him and his siblings. Of course, this and other such claims to literal truth are always unstable in Rushdie’s fictional universe, but it nevertheless marks a distinction from Jameson’s theory of national allegory. Thus, while I would agree with Neil ten Kortenaar’s reading of Saleem’s narrative as a highly complex allegory of national history, I am hesitant to identify it as national allegory (31). Saleem’s dis-ease is not a reflection of the state; it is an affective response produced through an intersection of the personal and the political.

The literalism of Saleem’s dis-ease also challenges us to rethink the parallel case of Rahel and Estha, the conditions of their “emptiness” and “quietness”, in The God of Small Things. While the non-linearity of Roy’s narrative is literally rooted in the twin’s
experience as witnesses as well as participants in Velutha’s death at the hands of the
Touchable Policemen, it is also worth noting that the Touchable officers are described
here as “Servants of the State” (288). Yet, in order to stay faithful to the rhetoric of Roy’s
narrative, I would maintain that the concept of “State” here refers specifically to the
regional one of Kerala, whose government represents a Big Thing, a point of anxiety for
Mathew. To assume a literal or metonymic relationship between Velutha, the Touchable
officers, the communist hegemony of Kerala, and the Congress one in Delhi is, I feel, a
stretch; it also risks a collapsing four different levels – the individual, the religious, the
regional and the national – of power.

Having said that, there is a metaphorical relationship between the twins’ individual
experience of dis-ease and the collective one of mass de-personalization. What is
common to both of these experiences, as narrated through the two separate translations of
Rahel’s gaze, is a sense of affective response to violence conducted in the name of the
impersonal. The first translation of Rahel’s gaze points to the nation as the perpetrator of
this violence. Yet, as we have seen above, the nation is also narrated and re-imagined as a
manifestation of mythological conflict between the Big God and the Small. The latter is
initially presented to us as a national allegory, a metaphorical explanation for the
workings of that unnameable country that Rahel comes from. As such, this allegory plays
a twist on the Jamesonian model by substituting the social realist mode of the personal
with one of fictional mythology.90 That said, if we remember that the referent for the Big
God is the sovereign principle of the impersonal, then the nation itself is re-presented to
us as an allegorical expression for the process of de-personalization. Thus, the nation is,
like family and law, another Big Thing in Roy’s fictional field of power, but it is
obviously not the Big God; rather, the nation is a manifestation of the Big God’s abstract
principle. This principle – the sovereignty of the impersonal – is presented as an

90 Another problematic aspect of Jameson’s argument is his association of modernism with the first world
and social realism with the third. Although one could find numerous examples of Third World modernism
(i.e., Rao), the use of mythology by writers like Roy and Rushdie helps to explode Jameson’s cultural
binary.
essentialism (arguably a civilizational essence) whose metaphysical power exceeds and transcends that of the nation.

As a result, the allegory in the first translation of Rahel’s gaze allows for a re-reading of the twins’ dis-ease as an affective response to the violence of the impersonal (as manifested through Velutha’s death) and more specifically, their role in the tragedy. Conversely, the second translation of the gaze allows for a re-reading of nation as a site of both dis-ease on a mass scale, and yet for reasons that have less to do with the nation than the cult-like sovereignty of the impersonal that characterizes that unnameable country that Rahel came from. Yet, again, that “country” is more than simply a nation; it is imagined, however loosely, as a civilization.

Thus, in short, the impersonal, as a sovereign principle and agent of violence, is defined through these translations of Rahel’s gaze as an essential aspect, if not essence, of that unnameable country’s civilizational essence – its Indianness. This is doubly affirmed through the micro-narrative of Rahel’s unsuccessful marriage: Indianness is what “exasperated” Larry McCaslin. His sense of estrangement might also echo a similar case of failed, intercultural relations in both Forster and Rao: i.e., between Fielding and Aziz as well as Madeline and Rama. However, what is unique about Rahel and Larry’s relationship is that Indianness is invoked yet rendered unspeakable, and this is largely because, for Rahel, the experience of being an “Indian” is inescapably one of violence, whether it be in the context of “Worse Things” like geopolitical war or “Small Things” like Velutha’s death and Estha’s dis-ease. In either case, the violence of Indianness is played out within a grand field of power.

Having discussed various aspects of this field throughout this chapter, I offer Figure II. as a map of Roy’s imagined topos of Indianness:
This is the *topos* of Indianness as imagined by Roy in *The God of Small Things*. It places caste at the centre with an emphasis on the bipolarity of Touchable anxiety. However, it also envisions two separate points of sovereignty: the Love Laws and the Big God, both
of which are principles to be upheld, though for the sake of negotiating power, rather than fulfilling duty.

In previous sections of this chapter, it has been suggested that the act of upholding the sovereignty of the Love Laws carries religious significance within Roy’s fictional universe. As I close this section, I will conclude that the upholding of the impersonal constitutes a political act, as is made evident in the pragmatism of Comrade Pillai. He does not believe in a Big God as a deity per se, but he knows that he must at least rhetorically honour the principle of its referent in order to preserve a sense of power (and desire) at a personal level.

In fact, almost all of the Touchable characters have this sense of pragmatism and masked personal desire. In Pillai’s case, the object of desire is an Assembly seat, while in Mammachi’s it is the security of her place in the family line. In the case of Baby Kochamma, her desire revolves around the pleasure of personal revenge for her own humiliation at the rally, but also for the more complex situation of her desire to see Ammu punished “for her sins” – though Ammu’s acts of personal love merely echo her own history of masked desire for Father Mulligan (243).

The next and final section of this chapter will turn to Roy’s rhetoric and allegory of History as the trope that unifies this topos of imagined Indianness. This section will also examine how Roy’s handling of History both overlaps and breaks away from the rhetoric of both Hegelian philosophy and Indutva fiction.

4.6 *Naaley* and the History of Indianness

The idea of “History” (often, though not always, capitalized) is allegorized throughout the novel as an anthropomorphic spirit. This personified figure hovers over the action and though it is never seen or heard, it is partly narrated as a force that impels the characters towards action: for example, when it escorts Velutha to the scene of his punishment (“History walking the dog”) (27). There are also moments when History is “wrong-footed” and “caught off guard”, as in the instances of Velutha and Ammu’s transgressive
interactions (167). Otherwise, History is mostly evoked as a figure that takes different characters on as accomplices, especially when they are involved in an act of religious, political, or metaphysical significance: i.e., an act of upholding the sovereignty of either the Love Laws or the Big God. Thus, when Vellya Paapen notifies Mammachi of their children’s affair, his ventriloquist performance has the performative effect of casting him as History’s “deputy” – an officer in charge of the Love Laws (190). Comrade Pillai’s dissociation with Velutha and his general attempt to appear impersonal, untouched and therefore unpolluted by his “comrade’s” scandal has the paradoxical effect of absorbing him into History’s plan: “He merely slipped his fingers into History’s waiting glove” (267). This may be a figurative description, but Roy’s choice of imagery is not arbitrary: by insisting on remaining untouched, Pillai’s actions evoke an allegory of Velutha’s assault as a case of his [Velutha] being touched by the hand of History.

Despite its anthropomorphism, the body of History is never fully described and this arguably grants it a sublime quality – much like the rhetoric of Un/Touchability as well as the unnameability of India. On one level, this element of sublimity is also consistent with the allegory of the Big God: History is imagined as an impersonal force. The Indutva rhetoric of the latter is indeed highlighted in the History House episode. As they approach and attack Velutha, Mathew and his fellow Touchable police officers are said to be motivated by “feelings that were primal yet paradoxically wholly impersonal” (292). The incident is also rendered impersonal by a reiteration of the officers’ self-denial of all personal feelings of empathy and compassion for Velutha: “any kinship, any connection between themselves and him, any implication that if nothing else, at least biologically he was a fellow creature – had been severed long ago” (293). Interestingly, their attack is also performed with an observance of the Love Laws with regards to touch and distance. Most, if not all, of their violence are mediated through the prophylactic use of boots, batons, handcuffs, etc. This includes the instances when Velutha’s genitals are “flicked” with a “stick” (294). Thus, while beating him down, the officers are able to touch his

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91 The gesture is repeated when Mathew “taps” Ammu’s breast to make her feel like a “veshya” – prostitute (9).
body yet remain untouched and unpolluted by him. However, given that the officers are dubbed “history’s henchmen” (292) as well as “History’s Agents” (293), their careful and perhaps highly disciplined awareness of their contact with Velutha’s body follows the same paradoxical logic that we saw above with Pillai: by attacking him through a series of prophylactic touches, the officers’ assault comes to represent a singular, allegorical, and impersonal touch of History.

Finally, it is through the means of allegory that Velutha’s assault becomes symbolically transformed into an event that renders him less significant than the Bigger force of History. As the narrator sums up, the assault represents a case of “History in live performance” (293). It is a work of theatre, thus echoing the rhetoric previously used in section 2.7 on Forster’s handling of History in A Passage to India. However, where History in the latter is displaced from the ritualistic Circles of the Gokul Ashtami (and therefore from the Spirit of Indianess), Roy’s theatre of History is dramatized as a more violent spectacle and arguably closer to the event of a sacrifice, with Velutha’s body as its ritual offering. By sublimating the assault on Velutha to a real-time spectacle of History’s ritual performance, the latter arguably takes on a darsanic character. History is glimpsed not by the officers, but by Rahel and Estha – History’s unintended audience and witness. I also argue that the object of their darsana is uniquely the History of Indianess, in which the latter is not only graphically revealed but also re-imagined as a spirit of violence, thus marking a radical break from the tropological use of History in Forster and Rao’s Indutva novels.

In her reading of the History House episode, Anna Froula emphasizes these elements of ritual and sacrifice as well as purification and renewal. She writes,

Purifying itself through the enactment of violence against Velutha – who operates between the irreconcilable terms of Untouchability and superior Touchable talent – the Touchable society cleanses and resets the boundaries that protect it as it expels the solvent that increased the permeability of its borders. (44)

While I generally agree with Froula, the term “renewal” is more appropriate than “purification” for my reading. (As argued previously, no Touchable really becomes
“pure” in their desire for power within Roy’s fictional universe.) I also see Velutha’s sacrifice as representing more than a renewal of the caste system alone. It enables a renewal of History, whose allegorical spirit extends beyond the human sphere of Un/Touchable relations and otherwise pervades the larger field of power that encompasses, unifies, and reinvigorates the impersonal power of the various Big Things, the Big God, and the Love Laws – the totality of which sums up Roy’s *topos* of Indianness.

Although the focus of *The God of Small Things* is primarily on the events that lead up to the moment of Velutha’s death, the allegory of History allows for reading his death within a larger frame of time and chronological events. These events are highlighted in the closing sections of the novel’s first chapter, when Roy offers us an overview of Indian and specifically Keralan history. This overview is presented partly as a preface to the chapter’s discourse on the Love Laws and partly as an explanation for the dystopic state of both “Paradise” and Ayemenem:

> Equally, it could be argued that it actually began thousands of years ago. Long before the Marxists came. Before the British took Malabar, before the Dutch Ascendancy, before Vasco da Gama arrived, before the Zamorin’s conquest of Calicut. Before three purple-robed Syrian bishops murdered by the Portuguese were found floating in the sea, with coiled sea serpents riding on their chests and oysters knotted in their tangled beards. It could be argued that it began long before Christianity arrived in a boat and seeped into Kerala like tea from a teabag.

> That it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. (33)

The passage offers a dual perspective on the nature of History. On one hand, it isolates the Love Laws as History’s point of origin. On the other hand, this reverse chronology illustrates how the spirit of History progresses from these origins through various social, political, and cultural eras. One critic has read this as a “history of imperialism in Kerala” (Comfort 3), and it is probably fair to say that most postcolonial readers will take this to mean “foreign imperialism”, which unfortunately overlooks the inclusion of Roy’s brief, but significant reference to the Zamorin dynasty. This approach to imperialism also
glosses over the case of Keralan communism as a movement that defined itself on the basis of a syncretism with “indigenous” values. Roy’s narrator foregrounds this point in the novel’s second chapter:

The real secret was that communism crept into Kerala insidiously. As a reformist movement that never overtly questioned the values of a caste-ridden, extremely traditional community. The Marxists worked from within the communal divides, never challenging them, never appearing not to. They offered a cocktail revolution. A heady mix of Eastern Marxism and orthodox Hinduism, spiked with a shot of democracy. (64)

By leaving caste issues unquestioned and therefore untouched, the Keralan communist movement came into being on the basis of cultural adaptation, rather than violent proletarian action. In the context of Roy’s fictional universe, Keralan communism is thus re-imagined as a religious movement, though in ways that are also predicated on a double-movement of History: Keralan communism emerged as a renewal of the Love Laws through a sacrifice of its own egalitarian philosophy. This double-movement is seen to be at work in Comrade Pillai’s rejection of Velutha and his subsequent re-casting of the Party through slogans of impersonal rhetoric: “And there it was again. Another religion turned against itself. Another edifice constructed by the human mind, decimated by human nature” (272). Yet, as mentioned above, it is through this dual act of renewal and betrayal that a populist, egalitarian movement like communism attains the de-personalized status of an Organized Religion – that is, the status of another Big Thing.

The double-movement of History takes the Communist Party as its object, but it also implies that all such previous movements (i.e., Keralan Christianity, European and local Indian imperialism) are predicated on the same centripetal and impersonal dynamics of sacrifice and renewal. However, it is most interesting that there is no direct reference to Hinduism in Roy’s historical overview – not even the Zamorin dynasty can suffice for this. There is the reference to “orthodox Hinduism” in the passage on Keralan Marxist history, but that would have stronger significance had it been deployed in the first chapter’s allegory on the origins of the Love Laws. Some might argue that the Love Laws
are a metaphor for the Hindu caste system, but that interpretation is something that I have tried to argue against through this chapter. To repeat, the Hindu concept of caste (be it as jati or varna) is very different from Roy’s fictional system of Un/Touchability, and so while turning to texts like Manu or the Vedas may help temporarily, they are limited as tools for theorizing the larger metaphysical field of power that is imagined in this novel. For example, Doreen D’Cruz has argued that the significance of Hinduism is virtually arbitrary:

Hinduism may have written the rules of engagement, and authorized the social and economic order that followed, but were this authority to be withdrawn, it would not follow that the social and economic order that it had promoted would thereby collapse. In the end, despite its religious roots, the perpetuation of caste is supported by deep-seated economic and social interests, which would rather reinvent the discourse of discrimination to shroud their politics or use the law as their alibi than surrender their advantages. (63)

Aside from the fact that I disagree with an exclusively social and economic approach to caste, I think D’Cruz’s point is valuable to the extent that it allows for a figurative re-reading of the Love Laws as a type of virus that spreads in disguise. Most viruses lack a clear sense of origins, and the same could be said for the Love Laws – hence, Roy’s use of a fictional mythology. Viruses are also understood as objects of endless spread and proliferation, and something similar could be said for the symbolic infections of all new social, political, and cultural movements that come into contact with the Indutva spirit of History in Roy’s fictional universe. These infections as such are more literally significant as acts of inscription – inscriptions written by the impersonal hand of History. Thus, as each new movement is inscribed with centripetal power of the Love Laws, it is legitimized as an organized religion and therefore as a Big Thing, but also as an event of writing. As a result, the History laid out in Roy’s reverse chronology of Kerala’s past comes to be read as a History of writing, the totality of which is doubly constituted as the History of Indianness.
Otherwise, if we assume that the Love Laws are a metaphor for Hinduism, then we lose the analogy of both the non-originary virus and the Derridean one of writing-as-supplement. The latter is important because to suggest that Hinduism – the religion or its individual agents – “wrote” the Love Laws is to then grant Hinduism the authority of authorship, and I am unconvinced that Roy would ever intend to do such a thing. This would imply that she deliberately chose to mask all references to Hinduism allegorically under the metaphor of the Love Laws. Given the novel’s fearless critique of Brahminical and Touchable forms of Communism and caste violence in general, I find it hard to believe that Roy would take such precautions. (It is also evident that Hinduism serves as an important resource for the novel, given Roy’s parodies of Hindu mythology, metaphysics, bhakti, ritual, and caste culture.) Instead, I propose that the absence of Hindu references is part of a rhetorical strategy to provincialize Hinduism and therefore recast it as just another organized religion, another Big Thing and therefore another viral event of writing within Roy’s self-consciously grand and imagined narrative on the History of Indianness.

This strategy of provincializing Hinduism is also consistent with the elision of Hinduism in Forster and Rao’s Indutva narratives, where the institutions of varna and the philosophy of Neo-Vedanta are abstracted from their Hindu origins and consequently projected as signs of civilizational Indianness. Where Roy’s counter-Indutva narrative clearly departs from Forster and Rao is on the issue of caste order as a system of violence and terror rather than of duty (dharma), oneness (brahman), and harmony (rta). Though what is perhaps more subtle is her re-imagining of History as that which unifies all of her tropes of Indianness, whereas it is represented in Forster and Rao as that which is either heterotopically displaced outside or else transcended in time. That said, while History is Indianized in Roy, it nevertheless shares the same figurative aspects of the Hegelian narrative. The History of Indianness is an anthropomorphic spirit; it is imagined with theatrical aspects; and it is allegorical. There are also a few aspects of Roy’s History that invert the Hegelian tradition: the History of Indianness is not dialectical, but it does follow a double-movement and in ways that leads not to progress, but renewal, if not regression, and most importantly, of repeated violence. Lastly, it is worth remembering that caste is one of the reasons why Hegel argued that India is incapable of writing
history. In *The God of Small Things*, it is precisely for the sake of preserving caste – Un/Touchable – order that History is violently written and rewritten.

Many of Roy’s scholarly readers have turned to the scene of Ammu and Velutha’s lovemaking as the primary and perhaps *only* site of resistance to History, the Love Laws, and other such objects of Bigness in the novel. In one of the most controversial responses to the novel, Aijaz Ahmad draws strong attention to this very scene as the focus of his critique (1997). He writes,

> Arundhati Roy appears to be representative of the social fraction whose particular kind of radicalism she represents. And she is a representative intellectual of this particular moment in India in her preoccupation with the tie between caste and sexuality; in her portrayal of the erotic as the real zone of rebellion and Truth; in her sense that resistance can only be individual and fragile; in her sense that the personal is the only arena of the political, and therefore her sense of the inevitability of nullity and death. (119)

In short, for Ahmad, the privileging of the personal, the individual and the bodily does not make for a strong political critique, let alone a work of “Realism” – capitalizing the latter as though it were a Big Thing (112). Brinda Bose was among the first to respond to Ahmad’s critique and she did so by refuting the dichotomy of the public and the private, the political and the personal, etc. Reiterating the claims of second-wave feminism, she writes:

> Roy takes on the histories that perpetuate such Laws, and to read her novel *politically* one may need to accept that there are certain kinds of politics that have more to do with interpersonal relations than with grand revolutions, that the most personal dilemmas can also become public causes, that erotics can also be politics. (68)

My own position on this debate is somewhere in between. I fully disagree with Ahmad’s de-valuation of the personal, but I am also critical of Bose and other such readers who tend to conceptualize the personal within the narrow context of sexual, corporeal, or
individualist politics – terms which were partly defined as such in Ahmad’s original critique. In my reading of the novel, the concept of the personal refers to a quality of touch as well as a mode of connection, contiguity and being. As a concept, the personal has radical significance within Roy’s *topos* of Indianness partly because it represents a resistance to the Big Things as well as the Big God. The personal is a potential threat to the sovereignty of the impersonal. It is also a challenge to the Love Laws because the latter are concerned with the nature of touch – again, who should be touched and how. I agree with that segment of Roy’s scholarly readers that interprets the “who” with regards to caste (and specifically Un/Touchable) subjectivity. However, one of the objectives of this chapter is to not only reconsider the rhetoric of caste as Un/Touchability, but also to the “how,” and the answer is that while Untouchables are not allowed to personally touch Touchables, the Indutva hand of History touches all in an impersonal manner. As argued previously in section 4.3, Velutha and Ammu’s love affair is a fourteen-day experiment in undisciplining and unsealing the body. This can be now paraphrased as a two-week exploration of mutual, personal touch, and thus it represents what has been called a momentary “arrest” of History (D’Cruz 69).

Yet, while such transgressions do constitute a form of resistance, there is at least one other case that offers greater scope for breaking away and going outside this field of power, but this case has also been ignored by Ahmad, Bose and others in the debate over the novel’s political message.

Earlier on, I argued for a reading of Velutha’s silence as an expression of his insolence, a conscious withholding of his voice and an adamant refusal to submit to the subject-forming discipline of a ventriloquized, Untouchable body. This act of resistance takes place through the course of his literal confrontation with his Touchable torturers and figuratively with the spirit of History. He loses his life through this confrontation, but he never sacrifices his insolence. It is also worth noting that Velutha speaks through his silences, but that he also speaks to himself when others refuse to hear him. The main example of this is in the moments that follow his last encounter with Pillai: “Tomorrow. He told himself. *Tomorrow when the rain stops*” (272). These fragments of interior monologue are resumed when Velutha reaches the other side of the river, standing naked
in a non-ritualistic state of meditation during the moments before his assault: “He was suddenly happy. Things will get worse, he thought to himself. Then better.” (277). When Roy’s narrator closes the novel’s final chapter, the word “tomorrow” reappears in the dialogue between Ammu and Velutha, it is also re-inscribed as a romantic promise made by each lover, one that is tragically to remain unfulfilled on the fifteenth day of their courtship. This is a common observation among Roy’s scholarly readers. For example, as Debjani Ganguly writes,

Their is not a love that can give them the strength to plan a future together. There is no way they can make inroads into what humanity considers the Big. They can at the most imagine the next day – Naaley, tomorrow. This heightens their sensitivity to every moment of togetherness. What we are left with is the poetry of the small in its aporetic fragility and tragic transience. (235)

While the level of pathos expressed in this scene is undeniably powerful, I argue that the meaning of “naaley” carries a radically different meaning when Velutha utters it as “tomorrow” in the minutes leading to his murder – which is also chronologically a later moment in time within the plot of the novel. In this context, naaley obviously has little to do with thoughts of romantic love and sexual intimacy. Instead, it connotes a confrontation with the History of Indianness and all that is connected through its allegorical spirit. More simply, “tomorrow” signifies a break from the trans-historical movements of “History”. Thus, what follows is arguably a prophetic vision of struggle (“things will get worse”) as well as liberation (“Then better”) from History and its Big field of power. This may be taken as a utopian vision, but it is expressed as one of process rather than perfection, with new ways of living which are likely to give privilege (but not necessarily sovereignty) to the concept of the personal at all levels of touch, connection, and contiguity between people, institutions, and perhaps even the natural world.

Some of Roy’s most erudite readers are quite sentimental when faced with the task of interpreting the utterance of “tomorrow”, mainly because they are aware that “tomorrow”
never comes for Ammu and Velutha. However, there appears to be very little interest in connecting the “tomorrow” in “The Cost of Living” with that of “The Crossing”. There is also very little interest in Roy’s use of the Malayalam word “naaley” in the lovemaking episode. It is not unusual for an Anglophone South Asian writer to incorporate words from a vernacular, bhasa language, but there is something uniquely powerful and provocative in Roy’s decision to close her narrative with this gesture. For one, this is mostly likely the form of the word that Velutha uses while speaking to himself about the future. Secondly, “naaley” is to The God of Small Things what “God si Love” is to A Passage to India. It has a haunting effect on the novel and particularly so for its narrative of History. Naaley, for Ammu, is literally impossible for the simple reason that her lover is killed. However, for the reader, it remains a vision of counter-Indutva possibility; it is envisioned as such in the moments before Velutha’s death, yet it is not contingent on the latter. It is also a vision that remains possible after his death.

Conclusion

The fact that Velutha’s prophecy for “Tomorrow” is partly articulated through a vernacular, bhasa language raises questions around the politics of language within the Indutva tradition. This dissertation has primarily focused on the imagining of Indianness through works of Anglophone fiction. The God of Small Things is important to this project as a singular counter-Indutva work because it raises strong critiques of caste at all levels from the individual, the societal, and the metaphysical (via the allegorical), but the mere utterance of “naaley” opens a critique of Indianness as such through the means of a

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92 We have already seen this in Ganguly, but similar sentiments are expressed in the work of Needham and Cara Cilano: “Of course, this reconfiguration or recasting of existing social and political relationships, only briefly glimpsed in the two moments I have discussed above, is presented as utopian in part precisely because it happens in a thus far unavailable future – ‘Tomorrow,’ for example is the word that closes the novel and the second utopian moment” (Needham 386); and “Even though by the time readers reach the novel’s last word – “Tomorrow” – they know Velutha’s and Ammu’s fates, her promise to him defies containment; it works as a promise of a future to come” (Cilano 37).
bhasa register, which is then both translated and transliterated into English. This is not to say that a counter-Indutva narrative necessarily requires a rejection of the English language; rather, it demonstrates how such a narrative composes itself through a critical tripartite engagement with both English and vernacular Indian traditions of dissent while subverting the epistemic boundaries of both. That said, it remains significant that naaley is not a Sanskrit word and thus, it enunciates a break not only with Roy’s imagined History of Indianness, but doubly with the language that is otherwise centripetally enshrined in Anglophone Indutva thought.

Is it possible to read Roy’s critiques of caste in The God of Small Things without engaging its signs and tropes of Indianness? As discussed in this chapter, many of the novel’s scholarly readers have done so and I do recognize the validity of such readings (including those which take the subalternist angle). However, I argue that to read the novel’s critique of casteism with a blind eye to the tropes of Indianness is to fall into a similarly, though reverse, dynamic that one finds in the scholarship on Forster and Rao, where a focus on civilizational Indianness and its metaphysical dimensions overlooks the politics of caste and varna in particular. I also feel that by isolating Roy’s engagement with caste from other aspects of Indutva discourse, there is a risk of reducing the novel to a work of realism, thus ignoring the allegorical micro-narratives of History, the Love Laws, and the Big and Small Gods. In other words, by focusing on caste as “caste” (not even rhetorically as Un/Touchability), one is probably no longer even reading The God of Small Things as a work of literary imagination. In an Indutva context, this is important to remember because the pre-novelistic history of Indianness from Sir William Jones to Coomaraswamy is itself rooted in textual imagination. Thus, when Roy supplements her realist portrait of violence against Dalits with allegories of the Love Laws et al, she playfully mocks anyone who claims an empirical basis for civilizational Indianness. As we can see, for Roy, Indianness is best critiqued through non-realist, fictional representations because the very idea of Indianness itself is a fiction with a long history of imagination that cannot be erased but only re-written and re-imagined for the purposes of resistance and empowerment – socially, politically, and aesthetically.
Chapter 5 Conclusion

Indianness is not a singular idea. It is subject to variation, and this project examines three cases of how Indianness as such is uniquely imagined in Anglophone South Asian novels from the colonial and postcolonial periods. Forster ironizes Indianness through the muddles of the Gokul Ashtami festival as well as through various perspectives of outsider subjectivity, including the colonial, the Christian, the liberal Humanist, the Muslim, and the secular nationalist. Rao imagines tragicomic losses and recoveries of Indianness within the personal realm of his protagonist’s affairs with both French and Indian women; he also celebrates Indianness within a global framework marked by the politics of India’s postcolonial, Nehruvian modernity and the post-imperial event of Queen Elizabeth II’s coronation. Finally, Indianness is radically re-imagined by Roy for the strategic purpose of critiquing acts of violence against both Dalit subjects and inter-caste transgressors in ways that are uniquely performed within an “Indian” context as well as at levels that range from the individual to the social to the metaphysical.

This dissertation thus engages plural forms of literary Indianness, but it also argues for acts of reading these narratives in terms of tropologies that share common elements despite differences in plot, authorship, historicity, ethno-cultural location, and political attitude. These elements include the tropes of caste subjectivity and varna in particular; brahman and other aspects of Neo-Vedantic metaphysics; the centripetal dynamics of Sanskritization; the mode of the impersonal; the Hegelian rhetoric of History; and the Orientalist style of civilizational essentialism. Indianness is tropological as well as allegorical, and both of these traits foreground the non-realist dimensions of Indutva fiction.

Despite the recurrence of particular tropes and allegorical devices, one may ask if whether these three novels are sufficient to constitute Indianness as the central focus of a literary tradition? I opened this dissertation rhetorically with an argumentative statement in favour of reading Forster, Rao, and Roy as the key figures of a literary Indutva tradition, and at this point I will conclude that the question of tradition can only be truly resolved by continuing to perform critical studies of Indianness in Anglophone fiction as
well as other forms of literature. The purpose of this study has been to research the three aforementioned novels thoroughly through acts of close reading, inter-textual dialogue, postcolonial theorizing, and other modes of engagement that draw on a range of critical perspectives from the diverse fields of anthropology, history, religious studies, and philosophy as well as both Sanskrit and bhasa literary studies. It is hoped that these Indutva readings of Forster, Rao, and Roy will enable other scholars to explore the possibility of similar representations of Indianness in larger oeuvres of fiction that take “India” as their central topos: for example, the Malgudi novels of R. K. Narayan and the Bombay novels of Vikram Chandra. The question of Indianness is also worth probing in novels that are often viewed as dealing with realist representations of casteism, such as Mulk Raj Anand’s Untouchable and more recently, Aravind Adiga’s The White Tiger.

Despite Meenakshi Mukherjee’s critique that Indianness is an exclusively Anglophone preoccupation, the readings presented in this study invite comparisons between writers like Forster, Rao, and Roy with novelists working in the bhasa languages, and particularly so given that those languages carry their own histories of Sanskritization as well as Dalit counter-cultural expression. Although Dalit literature has been translated into English (most notably by the New Delhi-based Navayana publishing house), the Anglophone world is still waiting to hear about a successful Dalit novel written originally in English. This is not to suggest that the latter has never been attempted nor that Dalits are incapable of producing original works of Anglophone literature. Rather, the field of postcolonial South Asian literary studies has yet to take proper note of such a text, but when it does, the question of that novel’s engagement with caste as a trope of Indianness should not be overlooked.

Another important question is if whether or not the politics of civilizational Indianness are relevant to the concerns of twenty-first century life in South Asia or otherwise? In a world where concerns over national boundaries and global flows are strong, the term “civilization” seems terribly outdated – much like the way Raja Rao’s novels are for many readers of Anglophone South Asian literature. Yet, at the same time, the explosion of Western anxieties over “terrorism” has revived the rhetoric of civilization with tremendous circulation through Samuel P. Huntington’s controversial work, The Clash of
Civilizations. Interestingly, Huntington’s focus is predominantly on Islam and East Asia; Hinduism and therefore Indian civilization are on the peripheries of his analysis. He admits this in the “Preface,” while reflecting on the opportunities he has had to develop his ideas through discussions with intellectuals across Europe, Latin America, South Africa, and East Asia: “These discussions exposed me to all the major civilizations except Hinduism…” (14). However, there is at least one moment in Clash where Huntington touches on the issue of caste:

If at some point India supplants East Asia as the world’s economically most rapidly developing area, the world should be prepared for extended disquisitions on the superiority of Hindu culture, the contributions of the caste system to economic development, and how by returning to its roots and overcoming the deadening Western legacy left by British imperialism, India finally achieved its proper place in the top rank of civilization. (my italics 109)

While the significance of “India” here is specifically with regards to its identity as a nation-state, a project of postcolonial modernity, and an ascendant super-economic power, Huntington’s general reference to “disquisitions” forecasts an outpouring of Indutva narratives that would probably echo the historical legacy of anti-colonial Neo-Vedantins seeking a Spiritual rhetoric of Indianness as a basis for sovereign claims over India in the Material domain. A critical study of the Indutva tradition, then, is relevant not because Huntington is right, but rather because many of us are in need of theoretical tools and textual precedents for analyzing the recurring tropes of Indianness in fiction as well as non-fiction.

A critical understanding of Indutva tropes is also potentially relevant for reasons that are less politically charged than the post-911 anxieties of Huntington and his admirers. As first-, second- and increasingly third-generation South Asians continue to rise in numbers throughout diasporas of Britain, Canada and the United States, the opportunity to scrutinize the invocation of Indianness in everything, from the building of Hindu temples to the modifications of (arranged) marriage customs to the remixing of bhangra and hip-hop, becomes urgent and especially as these communities take on the celebrated role of
“model minorities.” More simply, the question is whether or not the trope of caste, the rhetoric of Neo-Vedanta and therefore the process of Sanskritization is being reproduced in diasporic narratives of Indianness? I speculate that the answer is “yes”, but I nevertheless leave this question as a challenge to sociologists, anthropologists and scholars of cultural studies working in this area with the hopes that this dissertation may open a dialogue between our fields.

The high profiles of diasporic South Asians and India’s super-economic status is also paralleled by the popularity of Indian cinema, especially Bollywood. I foresee a great opportunity for furthering critical Indutva studies in this area as well. In her lecture at the University of Toronto (April 2013), Rachel Dwyer spoke extensively on contemporary Bollywood cinema as a crucial site and stimulus for both diasporic and subcontinental articulations of “Indianness.” The topic of caste, she argued (in response to one of my questions), has largely been silenced in Hindi cinema. Yet, as we have seen in my overview of scholars writing on Forster, Rao, and Roy, similar conclusions have been made on the representation of caste and its relationship to Indianness in novelistic writing. In the case of the latter, the main reason for such conclusions is that most literary critics have lacked a good critical vocabulary for the multiple registers of caste subjectivities: i.e., varna, jati, dwija, mleccha, Dalit, etc. This lack is partly due to a failure to engage with concepts and discourses from pre-colonial and vernacular South Asian traditions, and it is also partly due to a failure to treat caste in figurative and symbolic terms. Engagements with pre-colonial and vernacular traditions are de rigueur for studies of caste, Hinduism and/or Indianness in the fields of anthropology, history and religion, but analyses of allegory and other symbolic forms are unique to literary studies. A stronger response from English and comparative literary criticism would enable a rich conversation at the inter-disciplinary crossroads of critical Indutva studies, and this dissertation is intended as one step closer in that direction.
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